

The Book Of Discipline - 1587

The Sacred Discipline of the Church, Described in the Word Of God.

The discipline of Christ's church that is necessary for all times is delivered by Christ, and set down in the holy Scriptures. Therefore the true and lawful discipline is to be fetched from thence, and from thence alone. And that which rests upon any other foundation ought to be esteemed unlawful and counterfeit.

Of all particular churches there is one and the same right order and form: therefore also no one may challenge to itself any power over others; nor any right which does not agree to others.

The ministers of public charges in every particular church ought to be called and appointed to their charges by a lawful ecclesiastical calling, such as hereafter is set down.

All these for the divers regard of their several kinds are of equal power amongst themselves.

No man can be lawfully called to public charge in any church, but he that is fit to discharge the same. And none is to be accounted fit, but he that is endued with the common gifts of all the godly; that is, with faith, and a blameless life: and further also, with those that are proper to that ministry wherein he is to be used, and necessary for the executing of the same; whereupon for the trial of those gifts some convenient way and examination is to be used.

The party to be called must first be elected, then he is to be ordained to that charge whereunto he is chosen, by the prayers of that church whereunto he is to be admitted; the mutual duties of him and of the church, being before laid open.

The ministers of the church are, first they are ministers of the word. In their examination it is specially to be taken heed unto, that they be apt to teach, and tried men, not utterly unlearned, nor newly planted converted to the faith.

Now these ministers to the word are, first pastors, which do administer the word and sacraments, then teachers, which are occupied in wholesome doctrine.

Besides there are also elders, which watch over the life and behaviour of every man, and deacons, which have care over the poor.

Further, in every particular church there ought to be a presbytery, which is a consistory, and as it were a senate of elders. Under the name of elders here are contained they who in the church minister doctrine, and they who are properly called elders.

By the common counsel of the eldership all things are directed that belong to the state of their church. First, such as belong to the guidance of the whole body of it in the holy and common assembly gathered together in the

name of the Lord, that all things may be done in them duly, orderly, and to edification. Then also such as pertain to particular persons. First, to all the members of that church, that the good may enjoy all the privileges that belong unto them, that the wicked may be corrected with ecclesiastical censures according to the quality of the fault, private and public, by admonishing or by removing either from the Lord's supper by suspension (as it is commonly called) or out of the church by excommunication. The which belong specially to the ministers of public charge in the church to their calling either to begun or ended, and ended either by relieving or punishing them, and that for a time by suspension or altogether by deposition.

For the directing of the eldership let the pastors be set over it, or if there be more pastors than one in the same church, let the pastors do it in their turns.

But yet in all the greater affairs of the church, as in excommunicating of any, and in choosing and deposing of church ministers, nothing may be concluded without the knowledge and consent of the church.

Particular churches ought to yield mutual help to one another, for which cause they are to communicate amongst themselves.

The end of this communicating together is, that all things in them may be so directed both in regard of doctrine and also of discipline, as by the word of God they ought to be.

Therefore the things that belong hereunto are determined by the common opinion of those who meet so to communicate together, and whatsoever is to be amended, furthered or procured in any of those several churches that belong to the assembly. Wherein, albeit no particular church has power over another, yet every particular church of the same resort, meeting and counsel, ought to obey the opinion of more churches with whom they communicate.

For holding of these meetings and assemblies there are to be chosen by every church belonging to that assembly, principal men from among the elders, who are to have their instruction from them, and so to be sent to the assembly. There must be also a care had, that the things they shall return to have been godly agreed on by the meetings, be diligently observed by the churches.

Further in such assemblies there is also to be chosen one that may be set over the assemblies, who may moderate and direct them. His duty is to see, that the assemblies be held godly, quiet and comely. Therefore it belongeth unto him to begin and end the conference with prayer, to know every man's instructions, to propound what is the opinion of the greater part. It is also the part of the rest of the assembly to speak their opinions of the things propounded godly and quietly.

The synodical discipline gathered out of the synods and use of the churches which have restored it according to the word of God, and out of the sundry books that are written of the same, and referred unto certain heads

Of the necessity of a calling

Let no man thrust himself into the executing of any part of public charge in the administration of the word, sacraments, discipline or care over the poor. Neither let any such sue or seek for any public charge of the church, but let every one tarry until he be lawfully called.

The manner of entering and determining of a calling and against a ministry of no certain place; and the desertion of a church

Let none be called but unto some certain charge ordained of God, and to the exercising of the same in some particular congregation. And he that is so called let him be bound to that church that he may not after be of any other, or depart from it without the consent thereof. Let none be called, but they that have first subscribed the confession of doctrine and discipline. Whereof let them be admonished to have copies with themselves.

In the examination of ministers the testimony of the place from whence they come is to be demanded, whereby it may be understood what life and conversation he hath been of, and whether he hath been addicted to any heresy, or to the reading of any heretical books, or to curious and strange questions and idle speculations; or rather whether he be accounted sound and consenting in all things to the doctrine received in the church.

Whereunto if he agree, he is also to expound some part of the holy scriptures twice or oftener, as it shall meet to the examiners, and that before the conference, and that church which is interested. Let him also be demanded of the principle heads of divinity. And whether he will diligently execute and discharge his ministry, and in the execution thereof propound unto himself not his own desires and commodities, but the glory of God and edification of the church. Lastly, whether he will be studious and careful to maintain and preserve wholesome doctrine, and ecclesiastical discipline. Thus let the minister be examined not only by one eldership, but also by some greater meeting and assembly.

Of Election

Before the election of a minister and the deliberation of the conference concerning the same, let there be a day of fast kept in the church interested.

Of the place of Exercising this Calling

Albeit it be lawful for a minister upon just occasion to preach in another church than that whereof he is minister, yet none may exercise any ordinary ministry elsewhere, but for a certain time upon great occasion, and by the consent of his church and conference.

Of the Office of the Ministers of the Word, and First of the Order of Liturgy, or Common Prayer

Let the minister that is to preach name a psalm or a part of a psalm (beginning with the first, and so proceeding) that may be sung by the church, noting to them the end of their singing (to wit) the glory of God and their own edification. After the psalm let a short admonition to the people follow of preparing themselves to pray duly unto God. Then let there be made a prayer containing a general confession. First of the guilt of sin both original and actual, and of the punishment which is due by the law for them both. Then also of the promise of the Gospel, and in respect of it supplication of pardon for the said guilt and punishment, and petition of grace promised, as for the duties of the whole life, so especially for the godly expounding and receiving of the word. Let this petition be concluded with the Lord's Prayer. After the sermon, let the prayer be made again, first for grace to profit by the doctrine delivered, the principal heads thereof being remembered; then for all men, but chiefly for the universal church and for all estates and degrees of the people; which is likewise to be ended with the Lord's Prayer and the singing of a Psalm as before. Last of all let the congregation be dismissed, with some convenient form of blessing taken out of the scripture, such as is Numb. 6:24; 2 Cor. 13:13.

Of Preaching

Let him that shall preach choose some part of the Canonical Scripture to expound, and not of the Apocrypha. Further in his ordinary ministry, let him not make postils (as they are called) but some whole book of the holy scripture, especially of the New Testament, to expound in order. In choice whereof regard is to be had both of the minister's ability, and of the edification of the church.

He that preacheth must preform two things, the first that his speech be uncorrupt, which is to be considered both in regard of the doctrine, that it be holy, sound, wholesome and profitable to edification, not devilish, heretical, leavened, corrupt, fabulous, curious, or contentious; and also in respect of the manner of it, that it be proper to the place which is handled, that is, which either is contained plainly in the very words; or if it be gathered by consequent, that the same be fit and clear and such as may rise upon the property of the word, grace of speech and suit of the matter, and not be allegorical, strange, wrested or far-fetched. Now let that which is such, and chiefly which is fittest for the times and occasions of the church, be delivered. Further let the explication, confirmation, enlargement and application, and the whole treatise and handling of it be in the vulgar tongue, and let the whole confirmation and proof be made by arguments, testimonies and examples taken only out of the holy scriptures, applied fitly and according to the natural meaning of the places that are alleged.

The second thing to be preformed by him that preacheth is a reverend gravity; this is considered first in the style, phrase and manner of speech, that it be spiritual, pure, proper, simple and applied to the capacity of the people, not such as human wisdom teacheth, nor favoring of new fangledness, nor either so affected as it may serve for pomp and ostentation, or so careless, and base, as becometh not ministers of the word of God. Secondly, it is also to be regarded as well in ordering the voice, in which a care must be had that (avoiding the keeping always of one tune) it may be equal, and both rise and fall by degrees; as also in ordering the gesture, wherein (the body being upright) the guiding and ordering the whole body is to follow the voice, there being avoided in it all unseemly gestures of the head or other parts and often turning of the body to divers side. Finally let the gesture be grave, modest and seemly, not utterly none, nor too much neither like the gesters of players or fencers.

These things are to be preformed by him that preacheth, whereby when need requireth they may be examined who are trained and exercised to be made fit to preach: Let there be, if it may be, every Sabbath day two sermons, and let them that preach always endeavor to keep themselves within one hour, especially on the weekdays. The use of preaching at burials is to be left as it may be done conveniently, because there is danger that they may nourish the superstition of some, or be abused to pomp and vanity.

Of the Catechism

Let the catechism be taught in every church. Let there be two sorts. One more large applied to the delivering of the sum of religion by a suit and order of certain places of the scriptures, according to which some point of the holy doctrine may be expounded every week. Another of the same but shorter, fit for the examination of the rude and ignorant before they be admitted to the Lord's Supper.

Of the Other Parts of Liturgy or Divine Service

All the rest of the liturgy or divine service consisteth in the administration of the sacraments and by the custom of the church in the blessing of marriage. The most commodious form thereof is that which is used by the churches that have reformed their discipline according to the word of God.

Of Sacraments

Let only a minister of the word that is a preacher minister the sacraments, and that after the preaching of the word, and not in any other place than in the public assemblies of the church.

Of Baptism

Women only may not offer unto baptism those that are to be baptised, but the father if it may be, or in his name some other. They which present unto baptism ought to be persuaded not to give those that are baptised the

names of God or of Christ, or of angels or of holy offices, as of Baptist, Evangelist, ect., nor such a savour of paganism or popery; but chiefly such whereof they are examples in the holy scriptures in the names of those who are reported in them to have been godly and virtuous.

Of the Communion

Let the time of celebrating the communion be made known eight days before, that the congregation may prepare themselves, and that the elders may do their duty in going to and visiting whom they ought.

Of Signifying their Names that are to Communicate

Let them which before have not been received to the Lord's Table, when they first desire to come to it, give their names to the minister seven days before the Communion that care of inquiring of them may be committed to the elders, that if there be any cause of hindrance there may be stay made betime; but if there be no such thing let them proceed (where need may be) to the examining of the faith before some of the elders and ministers every month before the communion. Let this whole treatise of discipline be read in the consistory, and let the ministers, elders and deacons be censured one after another; yet so that the minister concerning doctrine be censured of ministers only.

Let them only be admitted to Communion that have made confession of their faith, and submitted themselves to the discipline, unless they shall bring letters testimonial of good credit from some other place, or shall approve themselves by some other sufficient testimony.

Children are to admitted to the Communion before they be of the age of 14 years except the consistory shall otherwise determine.

On the Sabbath-day next before the Communion, let mention be made in the Sermon of the examination, whereunto the Apostle exhorteth, and of the peace that is by faith. On the day of the Communion, let there be speech of the doctrine of sacraments, and especially of the Lord's Supper.

Of Fasting

Let the day of fasting be published by the pastor according to the advice of the Consistory, either for supplication, for turning away of calamities present or threatened; or for petition of some special grace. Let the sermons upon the same day before and after noon (as on the Lord's day) be such as may be fit for the present occasion.

Of Holidays

Holidays are conveniently to be abolished.

Of Marriage

Let espousing go before marriage. Let the words of espousing be of the present time, and without condition, and before sufficient witnesses on both sides. It is also to be wished that the minister or an elder be present at the

espousals, who having called upon God may admonish both parties of their duties. First, may have care of avoiding the degrees forbidden both by the law of God and man: and then they may demand of them, whether they be free from any bond of marriage, which if they profess and be strangers, he may also require sufficient testimony. Further also they are to be demanded, whether they have been married before, and of the death of the party with whom they were married, which if they acknowledge and be strangers he may demand convenient testimony of the death of the other party. Finally, let them be asked if they be under the government of any; whether they whom it concerneth have consented.

The espousals being done in due order, let them not be dissolved, though both parties should consent. Let the marriage be solemnized within two months after. Before the marriage let the promise be published three several Sabbath days; but first, let the parties espoused, with their parents or governors desire the publishing thereof of the minister and two elders at the least, that they may be demanded of those things that are needful, and let them require to see the instruments of the covenant of the marriage, or at least sufficient testimony of the espousals. Marriage may be solemnized and blessed upon any ordinary day of public prayer, saving upon a day of fast.

Of Schools

Let children be instructed in schools, both in other learning, and especially in the catechism, that they may repeat it by heart, and understand it; when they are so instructed, let them be brought to the Lord's Supper, after they have been examined by the minister, and allowed by him.

Of Students of Divinity, and Their Exercises

In every church where it may be conveniently be done, care is to be had that some poor scholars studious of divinity being fit for theological exercises, and especially for expounding of holy scriptures, may be the liberality of the godly rich be taught and trained up to preach.

Let that exposition as often as it shall be convenient to be had be in the presence of at least one minister, by whose presence they may be kept in order, and in the same sort, (as touching the manner of preaching) that public sermons are made. Which being ended, let the other students (he being put apart that was speaker) note wherein he has failed in any of those things that are to be preformed by him that preacheth publicly, as is set down before. Of whose opinion let the minister that is present and is moderator of their exercise, judge and admonish the speaker, as he shall think meet.

Of Elders

Let the elder know every particular house and person of the church, that they may inform the minister of the condition of every one, and the deacons

of the sick, and poor, that they may take care to provide for them: they are not to be perpetual, neither yet easily to be changed.

Of Consistories

In the consistory the most voices are to be yielded unto. In it only ecclesiastical things are to be handled. Of them; first they are to be dealt with such as belong to the common direction of the public assembly, in the order of liturgy or divine service, sermon, prayers, sacraments, marriages, and burials. Then with such also as pertain to the oversight of every one, and their particular deeds. Further, they are to cause such things as shall be thought meet to be registered and written in a book. They are also to cause to be written in another book the names of them that are baptised, with the names of their parents and sureties. Likewise of the communicants. Further also are to be noted their names that are married, that die, and to whom letters testimonial are given.

Of the Censures

None is to be complained of unto the Consistory unless first, the matter being uttered with silencing the party's name, if it seem meet so to be done by the judgement of the Consistory.

In private and less faults the precept of Christ, Matt. 18:15, is to be kept. Greater and public offences are to be handled by the Consistory. Further public offenses are to be esteemed, first, such as are done openly before all, or whomsoever, the whole church knowing of it. Secondly, such as be done in a public place, albeit few know it. Thirdly, that are made such by pertinacity and contempt. Fourthly, that for the heinousness of the offence are to be punished with some grievous civil punishment.

They that are to be excommunicated being in public charge in the church, are to be deposed also from their charges. They are also to be discharged that are unfit for the ministry by reason of their ignorance, or of some incurable disease, or by any other such cause, are disabled by means of sickness or age, let another be placed without the reproach of him that is discharged; and further, so as the reverence of the ministry may remain unto him, and he may be provided for liberally and in good order.

When there is question concerning an heretic, complained of to the Consistory, straight let two or three neighbour ministers be called, men godly and learned, and free from that suspicion, by whose opinion he may be suspended till such time as the conference may take knowledge of his cause.

The obstinate after admonition by the Consistory, though the fault have not been so great, are to be suspended from the Communion; and if they continue in their obstinacy, this shall be the order to proceed to their excommunication. Three several Sabbath days after the sermon publicly let be declared the offense committed by the offender. The first Sabbath let

not the offender's name be published. The second let it be declared, and with a certain day of the week be named, to be kept for that cause in fasting and prayer. The third let warning be given of his excommunicating to follow the next Sabbath after, except there be shewed some sufficient cause to the contrary: so upon the fourth Sabbath day let the sentence of excommunication be pronounced against him, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

He that has committed great offenses, opprobrious to the church, and to be grievously punished by the magistrates authority, albeit he profess his repentance in words, yet for the trial thereof, and to take away the offence, let him for a time be kept away from the Communion. Which how often, and how long is to be done, let the Consistory according to their discretion determine. After which, if the party repent, he is brotherly to be received again; by consent whereof he should have been excommunicated.

If the ministers of any public charge of the church commit any such thing, they are to be deposed from their charge.

Of the Assemblies of the Church

Particular churches are to communicate one with another by common meetings and resorts. In them only ecclesiastical matters are to be handled, and of those, only such as pertain to the churches of that resort; concerning other churches, unless they be desired, they are to determine nothing further than to refer such matters to their next common and great meeting.

Let the order of proceeding in them be this: First, let the survey be taken of those that are present, and the names of those that are absent, and should be there, be noted that they may give a reason at their next meeting of their absence, or be censured by the judgement of the assembly next. Let the acts of the last assembly of that kind be read, that if any of the same remain unfinished they may be dispatched. Then let those things be dealt in that are properly belonging to the present assembly. Where first the instructions sent from the churches are to be delivered by everyone in order, as they fit together, with their letters of credence.

Secondly, let the state of the churches of that resort be considered, to wit, how they are instructed and guided, whether the holy doctrine and discipline be taught and exercised in them, and whether the ministers of public charges do their duty, and such like. Furthermore they shall determine of those things that do appertain to the common state of all the churches of that resort, or unto any of the same, which way may be sufficient for the oversight of the churches. Lastly, if it seem meet, the delegates present may be censured.

They that are to meet in such assemblies are to be chosen by the consent of the churches of that assembly and conference to whom it may appertain. Let such only be chosen that exercise public function in the church of

ministry or eldership, and which have subscribed to the doctrine and discipline, and have promised to behave themselves according to the Word of God. Notwithstanding it may be lawful also to be present for other elders and other ministers, and likewise (if the assembly think it meet) for deacons and for students in divinity, especially those that exercise themselves in expounding the holy Scriptures in the conference, and be asked their opinion. Which to students is to this end, that their judgements in handling matters ecclesiastical may be both tried and sharpened. But they only are to give voice which are chosen by the churches, and have brought their instruction signed from them.

If there fall out any very weighty matter to be consulted of, let notice of it be given to the Moderator of the assembly next going before, or to the minister of that church where the next meeting is to be. The same is to send word of it in due time to the minister of every church of that assembly, that they may communicate it afore-hand with those to whom it appertaineth, that the delegates resorting to the next meeting may understand and report their judgements.

In appointing of the place for the assembly regard must be had of the convenient distance, and other commodities, that no part may justly complain that they are burthened above others.

In every such ecclesiastical assembly it is meet there be a Moderator. He is to have charge of the assembly, to see it kept in good order. He is always, if it may be conveniently, to be charged. The choice is to be in this manner.

The Moderator of the former assembly of that kind, or in his absence the minister of that church where they meet, having first prayed fitly to that purpose, is to move the assembly to choose a Moderator. He being chosen is to provide that the things being done in the assembly be written, that the delegates of every church may write them out and communicate them with the conferences from whence they came.

The Moderator is also by the order and judgement of the assembly, to give answer either by speech or by letters, to such as desire any answer, and to execute censures if any be to be executed. Further, he is to procure, all things to be done in it godly and quietly, exhorting to meekness, moderation of the spirit, and forbearing one of another where need shall be, and referring it to the assembly to take order for such as are obstinate and contentious. Lastly, he is to remember them of the next meeting following, with thanks for their pains, and exhortation to proceed cheerfully in their callings, and so courteously to dismiss the assembly. Before such time none may depart without leave of the assembly.

Those assemblies, according to their kinds have great authority, if they be greater; and less, if they be less. Therefore (unless it be a plain act, and manifest unto all) if any think himself injured by the less meeting, he may appeal still unto a greater, till he come to a general council, so that he

ascend orderly from the less to the next greater. But it is to be understood, that the sentence of the assemblies be holden firm until it be otherwise judged by an assembly of greater authority.

Assemblies or Meetings are either Conferences or Synods

Conferences are the meeting of the elders of a few churches, as for example, of twelve. There are to meet in a conference chosen by the eldership of every particular church, one minister, and one elder. The conferences are to be kept once in six weeks.

They are specially to look into the state of the churches of that resort and conference: examining particularly these several points. Whether all things be done in them according to the holy doctrine and discipline of the Gospel, (to wit) whether any questions be moved concerning any point of doctrine. Whether the ecclesiastical discipline be duly observed. Whether any minister be wanting in any of those churches, that a sufficient one in due time may be procured. Whether the other ministers of public charge in the church be appointed in every congregation. Whether care be had of schools, and for the poor. Finally, they are to be demanded wherein any of them needeth the advice of the conference, for the advancement of the Gospel amongst them.

Before the end of the meeting, if it shall be so thought good by them, let one of the ministers assembled in the conference either chosen by voice, or taking it by turn, preach publicly. Of his speech let the rest judge among themselves (the elders being put apart) and admonish him brotherly, if there be any cause, examining all things according to those rules that are before declared in the chapter concerning the things that are to be preformed by those that preach.

Of Synods

A Synod is the meeting of chosen men of many conferences, in them let the whole treatise of discipline be read. In them also (other things first being finished as was said before) let all those that are present be censured (if it may be done conveniently) and let them also have a communion in, and which the church where they were called.

There are two sorts of Synods; the first is particular, which comprehendeth both the provincial and national Synod. A provincial synod is the meeting of the chosen men of every conference, within the province. A province containeth four and twenty conferences.

A fit way to call a provincial council may be this. The care thereof (except themselves will determine of it) may be committed to the particular eldership of some conference within the province, which by advice of the same conference may appoint the place and time for the meeting of the provincial synod.

To that church or eldership are to be sent the matters that seemed to the particular conferences more difficult for them to take order in, and such as belong to the whole churches of the province, which is to be done diligently, and in good time, that the same may in due season give notice of the place and time of the synod, and of the matters to be debated therein, that they which shall be sent may come the better prepared and judge of them according to the advice of the conferences.

Two ministers and as many elders are to be sent from every conference unto the provincial synod. The same is to be held every half year or oftener till the discipline be settled. It is to be held three months before every national synod, that they may prepare and make ready those things that pertain to the national. The acts of the provincial synod are to be sent unto the national, by the eldership of that church in which it was holden, and of the same. A national synod or convocation is a meeting of the chosen men of every province, within the dominion of the same nation and civil government. The way to call it (unless it shall determine otherwise) may be the same with the provincial, that is, by the eldership of some particular church, which shall appoint the time and place of the next national convocation; but not otherwise than by the advice of their provincial synod.

Out of every provincial synod there are to be chosen three ministers, and as many elders are to be sent to the national. They are to handle the things pertaining to the churches of the whole nation or kingdom, as the doctrine, discipline, ceremonies, things not decided by inferior meetings, appeals and such like. By order of the same, one is to be appointed which may gather into one book the notes of every particular church.

Thus much for particular meetings, the universal followeth, which is called a general, oecumenical council, which is a meeting of the chosen men of every national synod. The acts of all such councils are to be registered and reported in a book.