

CONFLICT RESOLUTION *AND THE LAW OF LOVE* IN THE CHURCH

Video Lecture Series

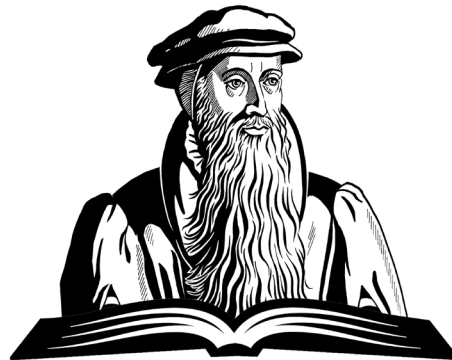
by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

Module 1

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE CHURCH

Lecture 4

Surrounded with Prayer and Love



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

Module 1 ~

Conflict Resolution in the Church

1. Introduction
2. Jesus' Instructions for Confrontation
3. Repentance, Confession, Forgiveness
- 4. Surrounded with Prayer and Love**
5. Excommunication and Restoration

CONFLICT RESOLUTION *AND* THE LAW OF LOVE IN THE CHURCH

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Module 1 ~ Lecture 4 **Surrounded with Prayer and Love**

Dear friends, welcome to our fourth study on the Lord's instructions, regarding conflict resolutions within the household of the saints. Now these studies are mainly centered on Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18. Step by step, the Lord has detailed how we are to handle sins that bring stress and strain, and that could lead to deepening division in the local household of faith. Now, if the Lord's instructions are followed, it will prevent the easy-occurring disappearance of tenderness and affection for each other's true welfare. For when we do not confront each other on the sin issues openly, timely, and in love, we may end up bitter, or we may talk about each other negatively to others. And once this happens, the evil spreads like an infection or cancer in our own body, and it self-destructs the body. But most critical in following Jesus' instruction is to have the mind of Jesus Christ, for then nothing shall be done to strive for vainglory. Instead, we will, with lowliness of mind, esteem each other as better than ourselves.

So, as we have seen, there are four levels of confronting a trespassing brother or sister. First one is beginning at our personal level. We have to examine ourselves on our sins, and that is to be a continual exercise in our personal life. Seeing our own continual failures will, with God's blessing, bring meekness in our own lives—it's so essential. This mindset is so crucial, when we approach the delicate act of confronting a brother or sister with the trespasses of God's law that they are or have committed. And then comes the second step, on a private level between you and the other person. And again, let's pray for the mind of Jesus. And when God confronts us with our sins, he comes with a readiness to forgive. And that's his whole purpose—to make it right, even the willingness to sacrifice his rights to make reconciliation possible. Now, the third step is the extended level, when we add one or two witnesses to the process. And the last step is the congregational level, where the entire church, or part of that, gets involved. And we'll look at those in this session, as we explore God's directions on the extended and the congregational level.

Now back to Matthew 18, and verse 16. The Lord states this: "But if he will not hear thee." Well that means that the personal confrontation, as outlined in verse 15, has, sadly, failed. Having spoken and having pleaded patiently, the trespassing brother has chosen to resist the exhortation.

“He will not hear”—that means he has consciously chosen not to respond positively. Now maybe he disagrees with the allegation, or he is unwilling to repent about the sin that has been committed. So, when the Lord directs us to move to the second level of confrontation, he does not tell us to do this immediately. There’s no indication that the instructions in verse 15 means “only do this one time, and then at once move on the extended level in verse 16.” God himself shows great longsuffering with us personally, how often does he not plead, heaping coals of love upon the head of the wicked. How long does he persist in seeking to overcome evil with good? It would therefore be God-like to show patience with the sinning brother. Yet, there comes a time, when the Lord expects his people to make the next move to the next level. He says, “But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.” This second level is called Confrontation at an Extended or Combined Level.” Now what are the exact details in this second tier?

First, we are to find one or two others to assist us in this reconciliation act. Depending on your personal confidence, or the nature of the trespass, or on the person you are to confront, the Master leaves it open whether you seek the assistance of one or of two fellow believers in this process. But who are we to take? Now that choice is totally influenced by the task these helpers are to fulfill. Notice, the task is not to strengthen your case, for then you would undoubtedly find your most supportive friends. Their task is to fight against the powers and the devices of the prince of darkness who is destroying the fellowship. And besides, their task is delicate, and therefore, it needs to be a person of spiritual maturity, and experience. Their task is to remove a trespass which is threatening the unity and peace among the brethren. In order for them to do this task well, they also need to be independent. For that to be the case, they ought to hear the story of the problem, not only from you. They have to do their own research first. For notice, that the Lord Jesus calls these helpers that you take along “witnesses.” Now witnesses, friends, are not people who have heard the story only from your side. They are people who have independent insight on the case that is at hand and are, therefore, able to provide their witness to the case. The persons who are to assist us are, therefore, people who need to hear all sides. For them to verify the truth independently is vital, for a pre-biased helper is not an independent or not a credible witness. He is merely more ammunition on your side to make your point. And what happens usually? Adding such to your effort usually does not bring healing, but it brings explosion. It is therefore so crucial that the one or the two assistants are qualified people. In the previous lecture, I likened this work to the precision work of an eye surgeon. Imagine an eye surgeon seeking the assistance of a blind person, or a rough miner who is used to work with big drills and hammers and explosives. No, we are not to look simply for those who are sympathetic to us, or are nice people, or are close friends. There may even be great wisdom in choosing someone among those witness who have close relationship with the offender, as long, of course, as this person is able to remain objective.

So to conclude, seek for persons who are people of integrity, meekness, impartiality, and credibility. James described the qualified persons as men who possess the wisdom that is from above, first pure, then peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And notice, the witness also have to be aware of the seriousness of their task, once they agree to be your assistant. The seriousness of the task is described in another portion of the scriptures, in Deuteronomy 17, verses 6 and 7. It says there, “At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is worthy of death be put to death; but at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death.” And then, “The hands of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So thou shalt put the evil away

from among you.” Now in the New Testament times, the final act of the witnesses are to partake in the excommunication of the offender from the fellowship. Now all of this reinforces the seriousness of the task the witness is given. Let me add that each member in the household of God is to develop, or to grow themselves for such a role in the body of Christ. Friends, you never know when you may be called upon to act as a mediating witness in the resolution of conflict between fellow members in the church. Well, how do you prepare yourself for such a possible task? Scriptures tell you: a steadfast walk, and prayer, in which you may mature in the faith, in which you may get the wisdom from above. And those are important elements in the preparation you and I are to do for this, perhaps, future task.

Now back to Matthew 18. With the Lord’s blessings, these steps laid out by the King himself, they should resolve most problems that enter into our local household of faith. Yet, that is not the case. We are commanded, after ample time has been given to seek a resolution, to move the matter to the fourth and final phase—the congregational level. And the Lord’s direction is given us in verse 17: “And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”

Now first, let us note that the Lord again does not indicate a time frame. It’s not after one meeting with the trespassing brother or sister that we immediately enter into the last and the final stage of this process. In the medical world, no doctor will hasten the amputation of the arm or the leg of his patient. It would be his very last resource after all the means have been exhausted. It’s good to remind you that church discipline that we’re here talking about, as outlined by the Lord, is not a punishment. It is spiritual medicine. Its main purpose is to bring healing to the sinner and in the body, and restoration on a personal and on a communal level. Consider this church discipline kind of like the intensive care given to a patient in the hospital. It’s a whole team of doctors and nurses who apply their wisdom and their loving care to the patient, and likewise, the entire congregation is to marshal forth all their resources God has given to seek salvation of the sinner.

Now secondly, the Lord described the response of the sinner as, “But if he will not hear thee.” Again, the word “hear” as used by the Lord, in the Greek has the meaning of refusing. It has the character of the stubborn unwillingness to deal with the sin issue. Sadly, it reveals, therefore, a hardening attitude of resistance to amend and repent.

Thirdly, the instruction is that we are to tell it unto the church. That is not an option, it’s not a suggestion, it is a divine command. Christ does not allow us to drop the issue after the previous attempts have failed. Perhaps such a temptation will be felt, for in this last and this final stage, the sin issue will be made public to the entire fellowship of the congregation. And this could make a deep stir in the body of believers, especially if it is a sin that involves the leadership of the church. Well, let all God’s children follow the instructive example the Lord Jesus gives us himself in his letters to the seven churches, in Revelation 2 and 3. I’ve mentioned that before. He brought the sins in the open, to urge all to repentance. And if the congregations did not return to God’s way, the Lord would follow it up with his judgment. And so are we.

Fourthly, he says we ought to tell it to the church. Now the word “church” refers to the body of believers united by faith through Jesus Christ. By all means, we are to avoid that the sins of a brother or sister will be made public in the wider community of the surrounding world. We are to tell it to the church. Now, the sins of God’s people, friends, do more damage than the assault of the devil and his followers can ever do to the name and the cause of our great God. And since the public nature of this last step is such a serious matter, some churches have adopted a wise rule, not specified in the scripture, but wise indeed. They have agreed among each other that before they

move to this last and final stage, that they would seek the independent review of this case by the leaders of another household of faith—a neighboring church. They ask others to review whether they have followed all of the Biblical steps in dealing with this straying member. Now, such an independent peer review is commendable, as it holds us to accountability in following Jesus’ instructions, as given in Matthew 18. It’s also following Solomon’s counsel, when he says, “In the multitude of counselors, there is safety.”

But then, who exactly is meant here with “the church?” Is it every single member of the church community, and of like in a combined meeting of all the local believers of the church? Or is it made known to those that are appointed to represent the church, such as pastors and elders, and maybe in a smaller congregation, including the deacons. Is that the church? Well, as the Lord has not given us the exact boundaries of this “church,” it is at liberty to develop their own methods, in according with the direction given in this verse.

But what is the purpose of sharing the sin committed to this enlarged audience? Well, the first purpose is to enlarge the circle of love that is going to be applied to this straying brother or sister. When a congregation is informed about the nature of the sin, it is a call to unite together in prayer and fasting. The well-being and the salvation of one of their own is in grave danger. Typically, churches convene in prayer circles, when one of their members is facing a serious crisis in health or in business, and we come together to pray and perhaps to fast. But the crisis a straying member faces is far more serious than a temporal sickness or a material setback. His or her soul, and her relationship with God is in danger. Now the second purpose for that additional effort may be applied to bring the straying member back from his or her destructive ways. Making the name and the sin public, that’s a serious step, and it needs to be done with great, great care. And each church family ought to develop their own guidelines on how to do this wisely. It is vital. It is so important that these guidelines are developed before a conflict arises. Now, you know it is wisdom to build your bridge in calm waters instead of a raging stream. And so, develop these guidelines ahead of time. I’ll give you an example of such guidelines, that could be followed and adopted by you, and followed in your church.

First, once a sin issue has become known to this last level, the leadership of the church would inform the sinner privately first that he or she is temporarily excluded from partaking in the Lord’s Supper, or from a leadership position within the body, until repentance has occurred. You could call this “silent censure.” And if no repentance is witnessed, the church leadership makes a public announcement that one of their members has been placed under a first level of censure for a particular trespass. Now the congregation is asked to join in supplication for one of their fellow believers—no name given, but simply there is one of us erring. Now, after sufficient time has been given the straying member to show remorse and make a confession, the church leadership moves to the next step of censure. Now the person’s name and his or her trespass are shared with the congregation. To mention the name and the sin is according to Paul’s direction and example. In 1 Timothy 5:20, Paul instructs Timothy, “Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear.” One other example is Philippians 4:2, where he writes: “I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche that they be of the same mind in the Lord.” In 1 Timothy 1, verse 20, Paul singled out Hymenaeus and Alexander, and tells them they are men to avoid, as they caused divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which they learned. So the purpose of this public naming is not to inform the body of believers so everyone can talk about it. No, it is a call to the fellow believers to action. At this point, before the final act of excommunication, we are not to avoid this straying or this stubborn sheep which is entangled in sin. Instead, we are to surround them in prayer and in the practice of love.

And then fourthly, last step, and most serious step, is excommunication. Nothing, nothing is more serious than the carrying out of Jesus' last direction, "But if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." The hardened and the unrepentant sinner is to be put out of the fellowship of the body. As a destructive cancer or a dangerously infected limb, the formal connection of this member to the rest of the body needs to be severed. Formally, the members, as well as the congregation, need to be informed that a brother or sister has been cut off from the household of saints. Other scriptures describe this action with the most solemn terminology. Paul referred, in 1 Timothy 1:20, to two brothers who were "delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme." That's strong language. In 1 Corinthians 5, verses 4 and 5, Paul gave instructions to a member in the church who lived in open defiance of the seventh commandment, and he instructed the church to do something. Now this man lived in a scandalous sexual relationship with his stepmother. The duty of the church was, "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh"—for this purpose—"that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." How solemn is sin that will lead to the severing and the separation of close and beautiful relationships. May God prevent all of us ever to err so deeply that it becomes necessary to be excommunicated from the fellowship.

So in our next and our last study on this subject, of Matthew 18, we will explore God's reasons for the severity of this action. And we will seek to know his will how now are we to deal with the excommunicated. And may God bless us with his grace and his wisdom in all these matters.