

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

Video Lecture Series

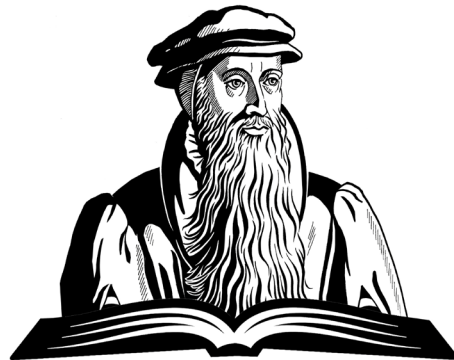
by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

Module 1

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE CHURCH

Lecture 5

Excommunication and Restoration



The John Knox Institute
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John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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

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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 5 **Excommunication and Restoration**

Dear friends, this will be the concluding study on the passage in Matthew 18, on the loving confrontation of brothers and sisters in your own fellowship. The Lord's detailed instructions in Matthew 18 is his good and his holy will. Following his directions in the spirit of love and meekness has time and again proven to be the path to blessings. For when we deal timely, and when we deal lovingly with the trespasses within the body, with God's blessing, it will prevent the destructive division that is ugly, and it will bring a mutual healing among God's children, which is so desirable.

So in this final study on the subject, let's first give attention to our Lord's words in Matthew 18, verse 17: "But if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." No action a church is to perform, on behalf of the Captain of Salvation, the Lord Jesus Christ, is more serious than the cutting off of a member from the church family and fellowship. And based on these instructions of the Lord, the Apostle Paul implemented this action in his letter to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul addressed the issue of a brother in the church, who was living in an open transgression of the seventh commandment. He writes, "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as it not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife." Now Paul rebuked the church fellowship of having ignored this sore evil. And now, since it's no longer a private sin, because it's commonly reported, Paul immediately proceeds to instruct them to execute Jesus' command, as stated in Matthew 18, verse 17. And he writes, "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"—1 Corinthians 5, verses 4 and 5.

Now there are different interpretations of this passage. Must we consider this an Apostolic power or authority not given to God's church today, or must we consider this as a rigorous description of the acts of excommunication of a member? Now, though it may be that Paul's act was more than the act of excommunication, let us at least use it as the illustration of excommunication. Paul's purpose is not, get rid of the member, or, punish him with a number of physical afflictions inflicted

by Satan on him. No, not at all. Ultimately, the purpose of his rigorous action of this formal excommunication is that this brother may come to repentance of this soul-destructive sin. And therefore, notice that Paul added, “that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” In other words, this excommunication will, hopefully, be temporary, and has the sole intended purpose to bring healing to the sinner, and restoration of the relationship that is now broken.

All church discipline is always to be considered and used as medicine, administered to an erring member of the body. Never is a church called to punish a transgressor for their sins. The punishment of a sin belongs to the civil authority of the government, according to Romans 13, verses 1 to 5. They have the sword of justice.

So, what is now the Lord’s will after excommunication? What is to be the relationship of a faithful believer to this unfaithful and unrepentant sinner that is now cut off from the fellowship? Jesus’ next direction already answers the question. He says, “Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” The cut-off member is no more to be considered and treated as a spiritual brother or sister. We may not continue to maintain the same brotherly relationship as we did before, as far as this is possible of course. Again, let’s listen to how Paul fleshed this out in 1 Corinthians 5, verses 9 to 11. He writes, “I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world.” We’re not to be on terms of familiarity, or in a habit of close intimacy who professes to be a believer, while living wickedly and to the dishonor of God. In Jesus’ own words, “Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”

Now, the best way to understand this direction is for us to consider how Jesus himself interacted with the unconverted, and with the unrepentant Jews or Gentiles. What was his attitude, as well as his level of interaction or communion with those who openly lived a disobedient and dishonorable life? How did Jesus then live in relationship to them? Did he entirely shun and shame them? Did he do everything possible to stay as far away from such as possible? Or did he have an arrogant or a judgmental attitude towards them. Did he speak evil of them, so that everyone else would hate them? No, no, the Savior himself did not do any of these things. Instead, he sought them, as a shepherd seeking lost sheep. He prayed for them, as a father for his lost son. He shared the gospel with them, as a preacher full of compassion. He went out of his way to even sacrifice for them, all to win their hearts. Yet, he did not have a close relationship with them while they lived as unbelievers, as he did have with his faithful disciples. He drew a line. They were not his bosom friends. They were not his close friends. He could not have that relationship. That privilege is only reserved to those who love him, who walk with him, and who show their love in honoring his person and his divine will. And they will experience the promise Jesus gives us in John 14, verse 23, “If a man love me, he will keep”—he will honor, he will respect—“my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.”

Now all added up, the Lord calls us to seek the excommunicated brothers or sisters as the objects of evangelism. We are to seek to win them with our walk and our talk for God and his kingdom, to win them back. And if they’re hostile to us, we are to love them still. Isn’t the Lord’s command, “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you”—Matthew 5, verse 44. Or, think of Romans 12, verses 20 and 21, where we are exhorted, “Therefore if your enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink; for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head”—we cannot ignore that—“Be [therefore] not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.” That is what his will is, and what a joy, when such labor of love and compassion, and such riches of our goodness will lead to godly sorrow and repentance through salvation. And if that happens, we are

to receive the repentant sinner back into our fellowship. Paul also wrote about that, in 2 Corinthians, chapter 2, verses 6 to 8, referring undoubtedly to the brother who was excommunicated in the previous letter, when he says, “[Brothers,] sufficient to such a man is this punishment”—or the discipline—“which was inflicted of many”—meaning, the local leadership and the membership of that church. “So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and to comfort him [again], lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him.” You see this example in Corinthians of putting an unrepentant brother outside the fellowship, and receiving him back upon repentance, illustrates the truth Jesus stated in Matthew 18, verses 18 to 20: “Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Now Jesus reveals here that when his people on earth faithfully and prayerfully execute the discipline of fellow Christians, according to his revealed will here in Matthew 18 and other places, and in reality, it is his own personal authority that is executed on earth through his faithful church. The being together in his name referred to in verse 20, is not simply referring to being together for prayer or fellowship in Jesus’ name. No, in this context of Matthew 18, it refers to being together in the authority of Jesus Christ, and to act in his name in the matters of ecclesiastical discipline. Jesus’ revelation of his own presence in these discipline matters brings home the weightiness of these actions for his church. For, if we, as his people, act according to his revealed will with the straying and the unrepentant sinners, as well, of course, as with the repentant and the returning sinners, we truly represent Jesus Christ, as King and ruler upon earth.

Now, what a solemn truth this is. When an unrepentant brother, on Biblical grounds, is excluded from the fellowship, then the action is the revelation of God’s own exclusion of such a sinner from his fellowship. But the reverse is also true. When the church absolves the repenting brother from the excommunicating sentence, again, according to God’s word, then this again is the revelation of God’s own absolution of the sinner. One who sincerely repents, and sincerely confesses his sin before the church ought not in the least to doubt that he is assuredly received of God in mercy. For Jesus Christ said, in John 20, verse 23, to his apostles, “Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them”—remitted is forgiven—“and whosesoever sins ye retain, they are retained.” What a sweet comfort is thereby also communicated to a trembling conscience. Such fearful souls may, by the official sentence of the church, be assured that they are freed from guilt in the sight of God, as they are reconciled with the body of the church. John Calvin concluded his comments on John 20, verse 23 with these thoughts—he writes: “For Jesus has appointed this as the pledge of heavenly grace. This has no reference to hypocrites who pervert the proper use of reconciliation. But it is intended to awaken in the godly an ordinary confidence, for as soon as they have obtained forgiveness from the church, they hear that their sins are blotted out before God and the angels”—so according to Calvin. This teaching, or this confronting a trespassing brother or a sister, and the command to forgive them prompted Peter’s question, undoubtedly when Peter says, “Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?” Now Peter, perhaps, was reminded of the instructions Jesus gave in Luke 17, verses 1 to 5, that we have looked at in a previous session. And brother Peter wondered, in Matthew 18, verse 21, if after the seventh time, Jesus would release them from the requirement of forgiveness. And very gently, the Lord Jesus instructed his disciples that seven times wasn’t the upper limit—the upper limit is unlimited. “Jesus said

unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.” The parable that follows then, in Matthew 18, in the closing section of this chapter, is one of the most moving Jesus ever told. With the example of the unforgiving servant, Jesus reinforces the important principle. He requires of all his followers to be forgiving and remain forgiving. The main points that we need to take along from this parable, in Matthew 18, verses 23 to 35, they are as follows.

First, as you read it, the king represents God. He is the sovereign Father to whom we all owe a staggering debt. The servant in this parable represents us sinners, who have clearly abused God’s gifts and the tasks that we have as his stewards. Now the debt in the parable is represented as massive—ten thousand talents, which in today’s world, would amount to multiple millions of money. The amount pictures the infinite debt of sin we owe to God, and obviously are entirely unable to pay. And then, in the parable, the compassionate act of the king pictures God’s gracious pardon of all our sins against him. His forgiveness is total. It’s absolutely free for us, but we know, of course, that God bore the infinite cost for forgiveness, for God’s forgiving meant to condemn his Son, when he took the place as a substitute for our sins in life and death. And then, the reluctance of this forgiven servant to forgive the miniscule debt of a hundred pence to one of his debtors stands in stark contrast with what God did. We are forgiven a lifetime of sin against God. Well, God calls us to forgive others’ mere little acts of sin done to each other, and some of them, indeed, are big acts. Jesus called the unforgiving servant “wicked” and he has delivered him to jail. Now with this, Jesus condemns entirely the attitude, in which we are unwilling to forgive an erring brother or sister. Saved people are both to be forgiving, and they are forgiven, and therefore, a reluctance to forgive fellow sinners really questions any claim to be saved. So, with this very impressive parable, the Lord drives home our lofty calling to forgive fellow believers, even those who have repeatedly fallen into sin.

So in conclusion, let us learn and practice church discipline on each other. Let us see it as medicine administered to patients. That medicine is usually not sweet; it may taste extremely bitter, but we administer it to the patient, though it is bitter. And so, church discipline, it may feel bitter, it might look rigorous, and therefore, we may feel the temptation to not ruffle the feathers or disturb the feelings of a fellow brother or sister in the church. Far be it from us to fall into such an attitude. It was the attitude of Eli, as we quoted in 1 Samuel. His rebuke to his sons was attempted with a soft touch, but it was not followed with the decisive action of tough love. We need to read it in 1 Samuel 2, verses 23 and 24, when God says, “And he”—Eli—“said unto them”—his two sons—“Why do ye such things? for I hear of your evil dealings by all this people. Nay, my sons; for it is no good report that I hear: ye make the LORD’s people to transgress.” Now, later, a man of God came and spoke to Eli, and he accused him of serious neglect. And he said this: “Wherefore kick ye at my sacrifice and at mine offering, which I have commanded in my habitation; and honour your sons above me” (verse 29). And finally, the Lord spoke to Samuel about the judgment he would bring upon the house of Eli, and this judgment would make the ears of everyone that hears it tingle. And why? What was the crime of Eli? Again, let us hear God’s own words in 1 Samuel 3, verse 13, where God says, “For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not.” So together, as Christians, we are to heed the severe judgment God brought upon the house of Eli, as a warning to us. Eli was negligent to use his authority as a father and as a priest, and thereby he brought great destruction upon the nation of Israel. So what was true then will be true today. Well, let us live by God’s own words: “For them that honour me, I will honour; and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed” (1 Samuel 2:30). So, God bless us all to be healthy churches, and a

healthy church is a church in which, besides the faithful preaching and teaching of his word, we also use the faithful means of church discipline, and then, in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, to the glory of God, and to the building up of each member of our fellowship.

So, this completes our review of Jesus' teachings in Matthew 18. Our next study will be on Jesus teaching on conflicts that often arise in the realm of our Christian liberty. And we'll look particularly then at Romans 14, and the first verses of Romans 15.

Thank you, and may God bless his word to his glory and to our profit.