

**Recommendation to the session from the Discipline Committee
for responding to the motion referred to it
regarding the public announcement of censures to the membership
2/20/2003**

I. Motion: That the Discipline Committee **studies the current practice of public announcement of censures to the membership** with the goal of **recommending to the session whether the current practice should continue or be altered**. Pending completion of the study, public announcement of censure to the membership will be held in abeyance.

II. Current Practice

- A) By name public announcement exclusively to Chapelgate members of the censure of excommunication, including the offense for which the censure was imposed.
- B) By name public announcement exclusively to Chapelgate members of the deposition of an ordained officer of the church, including the offense for which the censure was imposed

III. Basis for Current Practice

- A) **In the Gospels:** Jesus instructs us in Matthew 18:15-18 how to deal with sin:

- 15 If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens, you have won your brother over.
- 16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'
- 17 **If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church;** and if he refuses to listen even to the church, **treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.**

It would be impossible for any member of the church to relate to the excommunicated person as an unbeliever unless he was made aware of the excommunication by the church judicatory.

- B) **In the epistles:**

- 1) I Corinthians 5:1- 5, 13 The Apostle Paul also provides clear, unambiguous instruction. Note in particular Paul's passionate instruction in verse 4.

- 4 **When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus** and I am with you in spirit, **and the power of our Lord Jesus is present,**
- 5 **hand this man over to Satan,** so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.
- 13 God will judge those outside. Expel the wicked man from among you.

- 2) I Timothy 5:20-21

- 20 **Those [elders] who sin are to be rebuked publicly,** so that others may take warning.
- 21 I charge you, in the sight of God and Jesus Christ and his elect angels, **to keep these instructions without partiality,** and to do nothing out of favoritism.

C) The Westminster Confession

Chapter XXX of the Confession speaks to Church Censures and cites the aforementioned verses (among others) as the underpinning for the chapter.

D) The Book of Church Order (BOCO)

The BOCO leaves the decision whether or not to publicly announce censures to the discretion of the Session. Relevant portions are cited below:

30-4 Excommunication is the excision of an offender from the communion of the Church...The design of this censure is to operate on the offender as a means of reclaiming him, to deliver the church from the scandal of this offense, and to inspire all with fear by the example of his discipline.

33-2 When an accused person is found contumacious (cf. 32-6), he shall be immediately suspended from the sacraments (and if an officer from his office) for his contumacy. Record shall be made of the fact and **the charges under which he was arraigned, and the censure may be made public, should this be deemed expedient by the Session...**

36-4 **Definite suspension from office** should be administered in the presence of the court alone or in open session of the court, as it may deem best, and **public announcement thereof shall be at the court's discretion.**

36-5 **Indefinite suspension from office or the Sacraments should be administered after the manner prescribed for definite suspension...**

36-6 **Excommunication** is to be administered according to one or other of the two modes laid down for indefinite suspension, **or to be inflicted in public as the court may decide...the Moderator of the Session shall make a statement of the several steps which have been taken with respect to the offending brother, and of the decision to cut him off from the communion of the church. He shall then show from Matthew 18:15-18 and I Corinthians 5: 1-5 the authority of the church to cast out unworthy members...**

37-3 **When the court shall be satisfied as to the reality of the repentance of an indefinitely suspended offender, he shall be admitted to profess his repentance, either in the presence of the court alone or publicly.**

37-4 **When an excommunicated person shall be so affected with his state as to be brought to repentance, and to desire to be readmitted to the communion of the church, the Session, having obtained sufficient evidence of his sincere repentance, shall proceed to restore him. This may be done in the presence of the court, or of the congregation as seems best to the Session.**

On the day appointed for his restoration, **the minister shall call upon the excommunicated person and propose to him in the presence of the court or the congregation...**

37-3 **The restoration of a deposed officer, after public confession** has been made in a manner similar to that prescribed in the case of the removal of a censure from an excommunicated member.

E) The Purpose for Censures and Appropriate Public Announcement

As outlined Scripture, the Westminster Confession, and the Book of Church Order, the purpose of church discipline is maintain a) the glory of God, b) the purity of His Church, and c) the keeping and reclaiming of disobedient sinners.

“Excommunication is designed to operate on the offender as a means of reclaiming him, to deliver the church from the scandal of his offense, **and to inspire all with fear by the example of this discipline.**”

IV. Discussion

Having established that the root purposes of church discipline are preserving the peace and purity of God’s church and restoring errant members to the full fellowship and communion of His church, **public announcement of an excommunication or a deposition serves two primary purposes.**

- 1) No one is excommunicated without extremely careful examination of the evidence, extended interaction with the sinner and a absolute refusal of the sinner to repent of the offense(s) in question. Having remained contumacious throughout, public announcement of an excommunication or a deposition first and foremost reinforces the gravity of the offense(s) for the benefit of the sinner.
- 2) Additionally, publicly informing the congregation of the extensive efforts undertaken by the Session to preclude excommunication and the public announcement thereof, and identifying the person and his sin assures the congregation that the Session has been faithful to its duty to preserve the peace and purity of the church. While public announcement is primarily to impress upon the stubborn sinner his/her grave situation, it also assures the Body that we are being true to God’s word.

Our current practice of publicly announcing the specific individual and their sin is in accordance with the command of our Lord and eliminates the temptation to gossip concerning the identity of the errant member and the sin that warranted the censure.

Although the existing motion does not require it, there were statements submitted in support of the original motion that require some comment. One such statement read as follows: “whereas many members of the Congregation have expressed discomfort with the practice of exposing to the assembled Congregation the name and offense of any member who has been disciplined by the Session.”

- It is not the practice of the Session to provide the name and offense of every member disciplined by the Session. At present, only excommunications and depositions are publicly announced.
- Public announcements are specifically designed to make people uncomfortable. As indicated above they are to **“inspire all with fear by the example of this discipline.”** Perish the thought that the sinner and the membership could ever be comfortable with an excommunication. Pastor Steel’s 24 November sermon on I Corinthians 5 was excellent teaching on this very subject.

The original motion also asked for some research into the practice of churches within our Presbytery and of the PCA itself. While there may be some curiosity value to this information, we would not want common practice to be pivotal in a doctrinal issue. Because of this, we did not survey all churches within our Presbytery, nor did we deem a survey of the PCA denomination to be warranted. For the record, we have contacted some churches

within our Presbytery and there are several congregations that do publicly announce excommunications, to wit:

Broadneck - Yes, they make an announcement, depending upon the public nature of the sin, to members only.

Timonium - Yes, they make an announcement, depending upon the public nature of the sin, to members only.

Wallace - Yes, they make an announcement, depending upon the public nature of the sin, to members only.

Asquith - Yes, they make an announcement, depending upon the public nature of the sin, to members only.

While we should not be a slave to precedent and should always be prepared to repent of error if it is determined, we should nonetheless examine the impact of altering any current practice. By discontinuing the current practice, we would expose ourselves to discussion of the appropriateness of prior public excommunications.

V. Recommendation.

Having been specifically commanded in scripture, we submit that public announcement of excommunications and depositions must be our practice. Said scripture is cited in support of the Westminster Confession's chapter on Church Censure. **It is therefore the unanimous recommendation of the Session's Discipline Committee that our current practice of public announcement of the name and offense(s) of a sinner being excommunicated or of an officer being deposed be continued, and its implementation be effective upon re-ratification of the Session.**