**The Church: tidy or messy?**

Text: 1 Corinthians 14:26-40

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**Scriptures:** Leviticus 10:1-3; Matthew 15:1-9; 1 Corinthians 14:26-40

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 100b, 313, 414, 374, 180

**Series:** Doctrine of the Church (#6) – Belgic Confession (Article 32)

**Theme:** Order is to be established within the church according to the principles and precepts of Scripture so that the consciences of believers are not bound beyond the commands of Christ, the unity and harmony of the church is preserved, and church discipline faithfully exercised.

**Proposition:** The worship and governance of the church must be ordered according to the Word of God so that in the messiness of life as fallen people in a fallen world we meet Christ.

**Introduction**

Would you describe yourself as a ‘tidy’ or a ‘messy’? If you have a desk is it always ordered with everything in its place, how about your clothes drawers? Or the inside of your vehicle if you own one? Do you plan your days and weeks ahead, or just wait to see what happens? Do you live your life in a structured way or are your living patterns relatively unregulated?

These are personal queries which I’ve raised to lead us into the much more serious questions which this sermon addresses: Should the church be tidy or messy? Should church life, be structured or unstructured, planned or spontaneous? We’re going to focus on these questions primarily with the aid of a number of different passages of Scripture and secondarily with the helpful pattern of sound words which are set down in Belgic Confession Article 32. The three points of this sermon broadly follow the outline of this confessional statement:

1. Church order according to the Word

2. Church worship according to the Word

3. Church discipline according to the Word

1. **Church order according to the Word**

I find that if I leave my desk, my clothes draw or the inside of my car, over time they get more and more messy. Chaos gradually takes over from organisation and tidiness. Scientists refer to the measure of randomness or disorder within a system as ‘entropy’. The second law of thermodynamics states that the total entropy of an isolated system can never decrease over time. Isolated systems spontaneously move towards thermodynamic equilibrium, the state with maximum entropy. Putting this simply: things in this universe tend to become messier over time, chaos takes over from order. Hey, that’s why my desk is the way it is!

One of the great mysteries from a secular scientific perspective is why there is so much order and structure in the universe when naturally entropy, that is disorder and chaos, generally increase over time.

God has revealed the answer to the mystery of why there is so much order in the natural world. It is because He, the Creator, is a God of order, not chaos. We see this reality in His work of when He took the unformed void of the earth (Gen 1:2) and then separated light from darkness, water from land, making planets and suns, forming complex living organisms which grow, produce fruit, swim, fly, crawl and run in the intricately designed and integrated biosphere of the earth.

Then He formed human beings, male and female, who being made in His image (Gen 1:27) were called to ‘subdue’ the earth. This God-given dominion was not to be by carelessly chaotically ravaging the natural resources which God had built into His creation for our benefit. This task was to be conducted in an orderly way, exercising in good stewardship as image-bearers of God. One of the effects of sin in this world is chaos and disorder. This is the sad pattern that we see unfolding through the pages of Scripture after the fall of our first ancestors Adam and Eve.

Today, chaos and disorder characterise the lives of many people on earth. For many this is not so much as a result of their own decisions, but because of the brokenness of nations, families and the hearts and minds of other people like you and me. It was to those living chaotic, disorderly, fragmented lives that Jesus came bringing the gospel of reconciliation and repair. Remember that He said, **“***For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost*" (Luke 19:10). He ministered to many people with ‘messy lives’; prostitutes, tax-collectors, lepers, the mentally unstable, the injured, the weak, poor, the strong, the proud, and the materially rich.

Now the church in Corinth was a ‘messy church’ with many problems which the Apostle Paul sought to address in his letters to the saints there. When he writes to the church in 1 Cor 14:26-40 about their congregational worship together he exhorts them to be orderly and organised in their meeting together. The reason is given for this orderliness is in verse 33: “*For God is not a God of confusion but of peace*”. The Greek word translated ‘confusion’ is used elsewhere to describe riots (2 Cor 6:5), disturbances (2 Cor 12:20) and disorder (Jam 3.16). This confusion is not peaceful. Biblical peace is more than the absence of war, it is a deeply rooted harmony and wholeness. The Living God is a God of peace.

Paul concludes his words to the church in Corinth on the subject of congregational worship by writing: “*All things should be done decently and in order*” (1 Cor 14:40). The Greek word for ‘order’ was used to describe an orderly array of soldiers in an unbroken line. It conveys the idea of elements being in an organised sequence, not in a random or chaotic arrangement. The Biblical principle of order in corporate worship and other ministries of the church is expressed in the words of Belgic Confession Article 32: “*We believe that… it is useful and good for those who govern the church to establish a certain order to maintain the body of the church*”.

A trellis is a framework generally made of wood or metal which is used to support fruit growing trees or climbing plants. The structure and order in the church has been compared to a trellis which supports grape-growing vines by Christian authors Colin Marshall and Tony Payne (in their book on church ministry entitled “The Trellis and the Vine”). The trellis is necessary for a productive vineyard, but without any grapes, there is absolutely no point in having the support structure! The structures in the church are like that, they are very useful and good for fruitful ministry, but they are not an end in themselves.

The organisation of church life in the Reformed Churches of New Zealand is defined by a ‘church order’ which you can find in the back of the green psalter/hymnals. The 96 short articles which make up this order are by no means the only way a church can be organised, but they are based on the principles of church government, which we find in the Bible. They help our Reformed churches function in an orderly way so that we do not to become chaotic due to the potential influence of individual preferences, family connections or the personal ambitions of church members. There are different sections in the Church Order, as follows:

1. Offices of the church
2. Ministers of the Word, ruling elders and deacons
3. Assemblies of the church
4. Supervision of public worship
5. Church discipline
6. Administration

I would like to encourage you to have a read of the Church Order and to trace the principles you find there back to the Word of God. As you work through this document, you’ll notice that orderly public congregational worship is part of the Church Order, this is the focus of 1 Corinthians 14:26-40 and of our second point.

1. **Church worship according to the Word**

The English word ‘worship’ originally referred to the action of human beings in expressing homage to God because He is worthy of adoration, praise and thanksgiving. Worship is the right human response to a gracious God. Worship may be personal and private or congregational and public.

The focus of much of the Old Testament and also 1 Cor 14:26-40 is on corporate, body worship of God’s gathered people. Personal and congregational worship are inter-connected. When we gather together our collective worship is enhanced and invigorated by our personal experience of the Lord and His grace. However, our personal experience is guided, informed and affirmed by our collective worship together. It is not a case of ‘either/or’ but ‘both/and’ with public and private worship.

The importance of meeting together for congregational worship is underscored by Heb 10:24-25: “*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near*”.

When Christ spoke to the Pharisees and Scribes about the human traditions which they enforced on others, he quoted the prophet Isaiah, saying: "*This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men*” (Matt 15:8-9). We heard earlier from our reading in Leviticus 10:1-3 how Nadab and Abihu did not follow the instructions for offering incense properly and as a result ‘*fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them*’. This divine judgement may seem extreme to us, but it underscores the importance of worshipping the Lord according to His Word.

He carefully instructed Old Testament Israel saying: "*Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it*” (Deut 12:32). Following these Biblical principles, the Belgic Confession states in Article 32 that those who govern the church “*must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what Christ, our only Master, has com­manded.* *Therefore, we reject all human inventions and laws introduced into the worship of God which bind and compel the con­sciences in any way. We accept only what is proper to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God”.*

The principle here is that the true worship of God may be conducted only in the manner which He has expressly commanded in Scripture or which may be deduced from Scripture by good and necessary consequence. This principle is often called the “*regulative principle of worship*”. It is important to know that Old Testament congregational worship practices were defined in detail, but that in the New Testament church, there is much less prescription. Bible author and commentator D. A. Carson has noted that “*We have no detailed 1st century evidence of an entire Christian service*”.

However, the Word of God does reveal the form of public worship – the elements of the ‘liturgy’ as follows:

1. Preaching and reading of the word (1 Tim 4:13; 2 Tim 4:2)
2. Singing (Col 3:16, Eph 5:19)
3. Prayer – to be made for all men and for all authority (1 Tim 2:1,2)
4. The sacraments (Acts 2:42)

Other elements which may be included in a corporate worship service are:

1. Taking up of offerings on day of first day of the week (1 Cor 16:2).
2. Declaration of God’s forgiveness (1 John 1:9).
3. Public administration of discipline (1 Cor 5:4-5).
4. Confession of faith (Rom 10:13).
5. Public confession of sins (Ezra 10).
6. Pronouncements of blessing (Num 6:24-26).

Well-regulated worship is vividly pictured in the book of Revelation where God is glorified in the presence of those who praise and honour Him (e.g. Rev 4:9; 5:9; 7:12; 11:16; 14:3; 15:3; 15:5; 22:3). True worship focusses primarily on God the Father and the Lamb. For example:

“*Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen*” (Rev 7:12).

“*Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation*” (Rev 5:9)

Worship according to God’s Word is orderly, not chaotic, it does not bind the conscience of worshippers to anything other than the teachings of Scripture. It preserves and promotes unity and harmony in the church. Worship according to the Word enables us to praise and honour our God and King in love with our whole heart, soul and mind. This is pleasing to our Lord and glorifies Him as does church discipline according to His Word, which brings us to our 3rd point.

1. **Church discipline according to the Word**

We have almost come to the end of the six Belgic Confession articles which focus upon what the Bible teaches about the church. The last sentence in Article 32 states that in order to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God: *“discipline and ex­com­mu­ni­ca­tion ought to be exercised in agreement with the Word of God”.* Discipline sounds like a ‘heavy’ word. We tend to think of the word ‘discipline’ in terms of punishment, however the basic meaning is ‘training’. School subjects like English or mathematics used to be called ‘disciplines’ in schools and universities. The idea behind this was that by studying, the mind becomes disciplined to think in new and different ways than before. Today we might think of the discipline required to be an Olympic athlete which involves carefully structured training. In addition to training, the word discipline expresses the need to stay focused on a particular task. We express this when we speak of self-discipline.

Just as parents are called to train their children (Eph 6:4), so, one of the tasks of the church is to train God’s people to live a pleasing, self-disciplined and acceptable life of sacrifice before their Lord (Rom 12:1-2). The church is called by her Lord to train people to become self-disciplined followers of Christ; loving God not because they are somehow compelled to do so but willingly with all their heart, soul, and mind (Matt 22:37). Church discipline involves two things:

1. Teaching God’s Word and calling people to faith and teaching us how to live by faith.
2. Teaching God’s Word and calling people to reject what is sinful and to turn to Christ for forgiveness and strength.

Formal church discipline of an unrepentant sinner is part of the broader teaching task of the church. Matthew 18: 15-17 lays the Biblical framework for formal discipline in the church: "*If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector*”.

This pattern is reflected in our Church Order which sets down a series of steps to be carefully and prayerfully taken when a church member consistently refuses to repent. Firstly the truth must be carefully ascertained. Justice must be done. Church Order article 70 states that “*Disciplinary measures shall be applied only after an adequate investigation has been made and the accused has been given ample opportunity to present his case*”. If a communicant church member repeatedly rejects Biblical admonition and rebuke then the elders suspend him or her from the privileges of their membership, including attendance at Lord’s Supper (CO article 76). If such a member persists in disregarding calls to repentance, they will be excommunicated from the church in the hope that they will turn again to Christ and be restored again to Him and to His church (CO article 77).

There are a series of announcements in the church before excommunicating a church member as follows (CO article 78):

1. In the first announcement neither the name of the sinner nor the sin shall be mentioned.
2. In the second announcement (with the concurrence of the Presbytery) the name of the sinner and the sin shall be made known.
3. In the third announcement, the congregation shall be informed that, unless the sinner repents, he or she will be excommunicated at a specified date.

Excommunication seems to many Christians today to be too harsh, strict and unloving. It is not practiced in many churches for this reason. However the end goal of excommunication is the repentance and restoration of the unrepentant sinner. To leave sin which has become known unaddressed in the church damages the purity of the church and her witness of Christ to the world. It dishonours her Lord and Saviour. Christ has given His church authority to preach and to discipline. He has revealed in His Word the principles by which His church is to be ordered and organized so that she is not chaotic in her worship and teaching ministry.

Now let’s come back to the question we started with: Should the church be tidy or messy? Should church life, be structured or unstructured, planned or spontaneous? I hope that you can see clearly from the Word of God that the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is to be governed in an orderly way, that her public worship is to be according to Scripture and that she is to discipline her members as the Bible teaches her to.

Having affirmed all of this; it is vital for us to understand that we, brothers and sisters, as ‘living stones’ who make up the ‘spiritual house’ which is the church (1 Peter 12:50 are to varying degrees ‘messy’. We may have tidy desks, clothes drawers, houses and cars…or we may not. We may plan our time carefully and structure our calendars well…. or we may not. Whatever the external patterns of our lives, inside each one of us is a ‘messy’ heart (e.g. Jer 17:9; John 3:19). This ‘spiritual untidiness’ is present because we have not completely given ourselves over to the orderly rule of King Jesus. We persistently cling to habits, patterns, and ways of thinking which do not align with the Word of God. Whilst the ‘trellis’ of the church to which we belong may be strong and steady, the fruit of our lives is variable. At times, we may display the ‘works of the flesh’, like sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions and envy (Gal 5:19). These bring chaos into our lives and through us into the lives of those around us.

A ‘tidy’ ordered church is a blessing, but of much more importance are the hearts of God’s people:

1. who accept the reality of their own messiness,
2. who welcome into fellowship in the church other messy sinners and
3. who desire with their whole heart to display the fruit of the Spirit “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*” (Gal 5:22-23).

The Apostle Paul understood the chaos and disorder in his own heart, writing honestly and openly to the Romans. “*For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing…. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” (Romans 7:19; 24-25).

There is one primary purpose for all that we have been covering in the six articles of the Belgic Confession:

1. The catholic Christian church
2. Everyone’s duty to join the church
3. The marks of the true and false church
4. The government of the church
5. The officers of the church
6. The order and discipline of the church

Do you know what that central goal is? The ‘task’ to which we are all called? It is to come to Christ, who is the ultimate source of all good order, peace and fruitfulness in life and then to lead others to Him. If we lose sight of Jesus, then we are truly lost and no church order will save us!

Have you come in your messiness to Christ? Are you committed, brothers and sisters, having come to the Head of the church in true repentance and faith, to draw others who are also messy people towards Him? Are you resolved to ‘*make and equip disciples of Jesus, our Saviour, who joyfully serve and glorify God*’?

The order and structure in the church reflects her Lord, who is the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). He calls people out of the chaos and disorder of a dark broken world into His glorious light and He uses His church; ‘messy’ people like you and me, to do so (1 Pet 2:9).

AMEN.