

Receiving, Removing, and Erasing Members

An Excursus on Book of Discipline, chapter 2

Why are we diverting to the Book of Discipline?

- I've recently had some good questions about “removing” vs. “erasing.”
- That's reminded me and the whole session how often questions come to us when the session announces it has r”emoved” or “erased” members.
- It *makes complete* sense why this is so!
 - These are some of the fundamental duties Jesus gives to the overseers of a local church.
 - Consequently, receiving, removing, and erasing members is regularly announced to the congregation.
 - “Removing” and “erasing” are largely a mystery to the congregation.
- It easily feels *personal* or even *mean*, when it actually isn't.

We're diverting, yet really, we're doing a **case study** of the principles we studied in FG 1-4!

- This morning is an **example** of how the scripture and some of the biblical principles of church government get applied to the discipline of the church within the OPC.
- So, our plan this morning is as follows:
 - REVIEW elements of Preface and some especially relevant principles from FG 1-4.
 - CONSIDER a key text describing a duty of the ruling body of a church
 - STUDY BD 2.B
 - QUESTIONS

REVIEW from the BCO Preface

- We use the Tertiary standard *under the Primary* and Secondary standards—**not** *against* them.
- Our tertiary standards *don't* cover every circumstance but provide a *framework* within which sessions *actually lead* every circumstance. **Sessions must exercise judgment**—this is why ministers/elders must be men of wisdom, love, and deep faith.

REVIEW of Especially Relevant Principles for the Government from FG 1-4

- FG 1: Christ, the King and Head of the Church
- FG 2: The Church
- FG 3: The Nature and Exercise of Church Power
- FG 4: The Unity of the Church

Summarize most relevant principles:

- Scripture is paramount.
- Christ is our king who still gives officers to identify and edify his visible body in this age.
- Jesus truly reigns in this visible body as ruling officers *use their authority under his authority* **by conforming their rule to scripture**.
- In addition to conforming to specific scripture, they will best reflect Christ's rule by identifying and edifying his visible body in this age in a decent and orderly way.
- The church can expect Christ's true presence with her as she orders herself in these ways.

Fundamental scripture: Matthew 16:18-19

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Doctrine of the “Keys of the Kingdom”

- Ultimately, Jesus is the King.
 - Ultimately, Jesus has represented the people the Father gave him in eternity past in his incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension.
 - There is a “Lamb’s Book of Life,” but the ruling officers of a local church don’t write or even read that book. Its content is a secret.
- Nevertheless, when ruling officers, “bind” and “loose” people’s relationship with Christ’s visible church in conformity with NT scriptures, we’re to expect and respect that there is substantial overlap with the unseen, ultimate activity of Christ himself.
 - “Bind” = “prevent” = “lock” = “exclude”
 - “Loose” = “permit” = “unlock” = “welcome/include”

So...BD 2.B.2 & 3 are ***how*** the **OPC** works out...

- ...scripture (Mt. 16:18-19 *et. al.*)
- ...and the Biblical principles of church government (summarized in FG1-4)
- ...in an orderly way.

BUT...BD 2.B's details don't *easily* line up with Jesus' "binding" and "loosing"!

- It **isn't** as simple as :
 - "Loose" = "receive" (BD 2.B.2)
 - "Bind" = "remove" and/or "erase" (BD 2.B.3)
- For example:
 - If a session, dissatisfied with a person's profession, simply determines *not to receive him/her*, the session has "locked" the kingdom to that person ("bind").
 - Half the categories of "remove" indicate that a person is still a member in good standing of Christ's visible church (BD 2.B.3.a-c).
 - "Erase" sometimes, *but not always*, indicates that a person is "bound."

An **overview** of “Receive,” “remove,” and “erase” in the Book of Discipline:

- RECEIVE: always indicates a person is being received into a particular visible congregation; sometimes it also indicates a person is being “loosed” into the visible church for the very first time.
- REMOVE & ERASE: both always indicate that a person is no longer on the roll of a particular visible congregation. *What distinguishes them?*
 - REMOVE: indicates that some sort of clear, orderly process has led to the person no longer remaining on the roll of a particular congregation.
 - ERASE: “catch-all” category indicating that a **member has done or not done something wrong or irregular** that **requires *or allows* the session** to indicate that his removal from the roll of members is **irregular**.

“Receive” (BD 2.B.2)

- “Receive” always indicates a person is being received into a particular visible congregation.
- It sometimes indicates a person is being “loosed” into the visible church for the very first time.

Six “Receive” scenarios (BD 2.B.2)

- 2.B.2.a: “letter of transfer”—currently a communicant member of another OPC
- 2.B.2.b: “letter of transfer”—currently a communicant member of a church *of like faith and practice* (not OPC)
- 2.B.2.c: “reaffirmation of faith”—currently OR previously a member of a Christian church of *not like faith and practice* by profession of faith
- 2.B.2.d: “**profession of faith**”—not previously a member of a Christian church by public profession of faith
- 2.B.2.e: “**baptism**”—unbaptized child of at least one parent who is a communicant member of the church
- 2.B.2.f: “with his parents”—an already-baptized child who is coming with his parents under a, b, c, or d above

“Remove” (BD 2.B.3.a, b, c, e, f, and g)

- “Remove” always indicates that a person is no longer on the roll of a particular, visible congregation.
- “Remove” also indicates that some sort of clear, orderly process has led to the person no longer remaining on the roll of a particular congregation.
 - Sometimes they are now on the roll of another church/congregation (a, b, and e).
 - Sometimes they are not on the roll of any local church:
 - ordination as a minister (c) [on roll of regional church]
 - death (f)
 - excommunication (g)

“Remove” (BD 2.B.3.a, b, and e)

Sometimes they are now on the roll of another local church.

- 2.B.3.a: “letter of transfer”—the session considers the receiving church to be a church *of like faith and practice*, typically OPC or a NAPARC congregation
- 2.B.3.b: “letter of standing”—the session considers the receiving church one that is likely advance the spiritual interest of the member, though not of like faith and practice
- 2.B.3.e: a *baptized member* is being removed because his/her parent(s) are being removed

“Erase” (BD 2.B.3.d w/six scenarios)

- “Erase” always indicates that a person is no longer on the roll of a particular visible congregation.
- Thus, “erasure” is a subcategory of “remove”: “Members may be removed by erasure according to the following provisions,” (BD 2.B.3.d, emphasis added).
- “Erasure” is a “catch-all” category indicating that a **member has done or not done something wrong or irregular that **requires** (“shall”) *or allows* (“may”) **the session**** to indicate that his/her removal from the roll of members is **irregular**.
- In this limited sense, “Erasure is an act of discipline without full process,” (BD V.2).

“Erase” (BD 2.B.3.d w/six scenarios)

- (1): “erasure by letter of standing”—neither of like practice nor will advance his spiritual interests—*a judgment of the session*
- (2): “erasure at his own request”—does not desire to remain in the fellowship of the OPC (nor connects with another church)
- (3): “erasure without a certificate of dismissal”
- (4): “erasure because unable to be found”
- (5): “erasure due to persistently attending another church, or persistently and over an extended period of time absents himself from the stated services of the church”
- (6): “erasure (of baptized member) having neglected to profess faith in Christ”

“Erasure” is the *itchy* kind of “removal”!

- In one way or another, *the session is saying*, “This member has done something wrong or irregular.” It varies:
 - The session *could* be saying as little as, “This member isn’t communicating with us.”
 - The session *could* be saying, “He has made a bad decision about the church he has connected with—we think it is a seriously unhealthy or really bad ‘church.’”
 - The session *could* be saying, “This member is outside Christ’s visible church and should not be considered a Christian in that sense.”
 - The session *could* be saying, “This member is not a believer.”
 - The session *could* be saying *other things, too*—it’s a “catch all.”

“Erasure” is itchy for both the session and the congregation.

- It’s itchy for the session.
 - Something sad is happening with the member.
 - Sometimes the shepherding relationship has deteriorated.
 - The session feels helpless—it has lost its ability to influence toward what is best and good and faithful.
 - Sometimes the actual situation doesn’t easily fall into one of the six “erasure” categories.
- It’s itchy for the congregation.
 - The congregation cares about the member in question.
 - The congregation rarely (if ever!) has all the details that the session does—what *exactly* is the session saying? [could...could...could...could...could]
 - The congregation just gets suddenly served an announcement in the bulletin.
 - Lack of detail leaves members wondering, “Could I be next?”

Some questions to think through...

- Who is given authority to determine who belongs to the visible body of Christ?
- Who is given authority to determine that someone's relationship to the visible body of Christ has ended or is irregular?
- Whose actions (or lack of action) leads to a session's determination to "receive," "remove," or "erase"?
- Are "receive," "remove," and "erase" ways a session exhibits animus, shows favoritism, silences opposition, or wins arguments?
- Would the visible church be more pure, peaceful, and unified if sessions didn't officially "receive," "remove," or "erase"?

Questions?