

Church Discipline

One of the problems confronting churches, is to know what to do when members commit serious wrong doing. Some do nothing, while others over react. Do not mess it up!

R. McCheyne, an old time preacher mentions that when he entered the ministry, he looked upon the most important tasks as that of preaching and prayer and when he and the elders were confronted with undisciplined behaviour, his abhorrence of having to bring correction was such that it almost drove him away from the ministry. In time though, he began to see 'that if preaching be an ordinance from God, so is church discipline'.

Although Attila the Hun was a cruel ruler one thing he noted was that discipline is not suppression (Roberts 1987:36); correct. The Biblical motivation for discipline is firstly protection for God's people and secondly, restoration for the sinner.

Most pastors hate confrontation and will avoid it, if possible, especially if the unruly behaviour stems from leadership or influential people within the congregation. However poor behaviour left unchecked places its mark upon the church and in time lessens its effectiveness and saps its spiritual vitality. Again, Huns makes the comment that morale and discipline are central to unity (Roberts 1987:35). Failing to exercise discipline for whatever reason will lead to discontent and ultimately division.

One of the great regrets George Whitfield had towards the end of his life was that he had no disciplinary structure where he could place his converts. John Wesley formed society groups. Whitfield found that many of his converts did not last and referred to them as 'a rope of sand'.

Twenty years ago ethical issues were a lot clearer than today. Things appeared to be black and white, but now many situations seem more complex. Take for example, adultery. Scripture (Galatians 5:19-21) teaches that people living in an adultery will not enter the kingdom of God. This means then, that they cannot be a legitimate church member. However, what about a defacto couple where the couple have been living together for years and have four children to care for? Also, what if the husband comes to know the Lord while the defacto wife does not? Naturally, of course we would encourage the couple to get married, but perhaps the defacto wife is not interested. Should the defacto husband be banned from fellowship because he stays in that defacto relationship, or should he be less than responsible and walk out of it? A bigger issue still is when he wants to serve in the church. Is the answer to get married and then become unequally yoked? It is easy for some pastors to come up with quick glib answers, but even Scripture is silent when it comes to dealing with some complex cultural problems. So then, the gift I covert more than any other is that of *wisdom* and along with that, must go discernment and love, especially in cases of discipline.

Corrective measures to be taken

1. *Timing is important.* Do not rush in and discipline prematurely where facts are unsubstantiated. However, leaving a situation unchecked too long can create complications.
2. *Be discerning of that person's spirit.* Words can say one thing and a person's spirit another. The first young Christian lady I ever approached, having been accused of having an adulterous affair (I took another person with me) denied the allegations. She sounded so convincing and was so sweet and attractive that she had me deceived in no time at all. Later, I realised my mistake.
3. *Follow Biblical guidelines.* Matthew 18:15-17 makes the order for discipline clear;
 - a - go to the person privately.
 - b - if he/she will not listen, take another person with you.
 - c - if the person does not respond then take it to the church.
4. *Repentance* and restoration must be the highest aim in any corrective measures taken, not however, to wave the rod and to portray our self-righteousness. Therefore, much prayer and even tears can purify our motives. Galatians 6:1-3. This brings godly sorrow. However, sometimes it is difficult to ascertain when there is true repentance.
5. Generally, if no other person is involved then the sin *should not be made public*, although it may need to go to the elder's team. Depending upon the severity of the situation, the offender may need to step down from ministry for a time and you do not always have to give a reason to others. Normally, you will not need to proceed further, as it may do more harm than good.
If on the other hand, the sin should be *made public* because of embezzlement of funds for example, (which is a sin against the church) then the person concerned should voluntarily express regret to the church at a special meeting, as not only will it come out eventually, but it may also help the repentance process to begin more quickly. It will also enable the church to offer forgiveness, even though there will need to be restitution. Do not over protect the offender as there are no short cuts to repentance. This is a process that takes time. We can fear the worst in exposing sin, but it is surprising how loving and forgiving a congregation can be. Never be controlled by fear. A large church may need to treat this in another way when most don't need to know about it.
6. If the offender *refuses to repent of wrong doing*, then a special Member's Meeting may need to be called, depending again on the severity of the case, but remember-
 - a - this will spread the knowledge of the offence.
 - b - young and immature members may not cope well with the information.
 - c - possibly legal action could be incited against the church if it is talked about

outside the meeting.

If a special Member's meeting is called:

- a - Be sure that a 'prima facia' case is established. That is, that you are sure of your facts.
- b - If the charge is denied, make certain that the witnesses are prepared to give evidence, otherwise it is advisable to proceed no further.
- c - Act in every way in accordance with the church's constitution.
- d - Be fair. Act also according to godly justice.
You may need to inform the accused in writing of the time of the meeting. Be specific about the charge so that he/she is in no doubt as to the nature of it and if possible, you should register the letter with an acknowledgment provision. If the person fails to appear, the church may then proceed to take whatever action is necessary.

The pastor may not be the best chairperson, as he could be emotionally involved. Appoint an independent chairperson. It could be a denominational representative.

Give the offender plenty of time to speak.

Notify the offender of the decision of the meeting in writing.

Only members may be present and breach of this means loss of limited privilege.

Members must be warned that limited privilege applies only within the meeting in some countries, whereas laws of slander and libel apply outside the meeting.

Naturally, the above situation is assuming the worst situation and please be aware that legal requirements could change over time and it could vary depending on the constitution of the church and how large the church is.

A church can experience a great sense of security when a person is disciplined fairly and in love. People then feel they are governed by leaders who care about their welfare. Even when we must discipline leaders and friends, it does not necessarily mean the end of that friendship or the end of their ministry either.

'My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins'. James 5:19,20.