

Church Discipline

Churches often struggle to know how to respond when members commit serious wrongdoing. Some do nothing, while others react too harshly. These situations must be handled with wisdom.

R. McChesney, 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'. The Biblical motivation for discipline is firstly protection for God's people and secondly, restoration for the sinner.

Most pastors dislike confrontation and, if possible, try to avoid it—especially when the misconduct involves leaders or influential members of the congregation. Yet when poor behaviour goes unaddressed, it damages the church, weakens its effectiveness, and drains its spiritual vitality. Failing to exercise discipline, whatever the reason, leads to discontent and ultimately division.

One of George Whitfield's great regrets late in life was the lack of a disciplinary structure to support his converts. John Wesley, by contrast, formed society groups. Whitfield found that many of his converts did not endure and described them as 'a rope of sand'.

Ethical issues seemed much clearer twenty years ago. What once appeared black and white now often seems far more complex.

Consider adultery, for example. Scripture (Galatians 5:19–21) teaches that those who continue in adultery will not inherit the kingdom of God, which means they cannot rightly be recognised as church members. But what about a de facto couple who have lived together for years and are raising four children? What if the husband comes to faith while the wife does not? We would naturally encourage marriage, but she may have no interest in it. In that case, should the man be excluded from fellowship because he remains in that relationship, or would it be irresponsible for him to leave? Most pastors would believe it would be wrong for him to leave the church in this situation. The issue becomes even more difficult if he wishes to serve in the church.

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 covet more than any other is that of *wisdom* and along with that, must go discernment and love, especially in cases of discipline.

Spiritual abuse can occur when church discipline is over emphasised especially without sufficient love. We must carefully examine our motives when bringing correction. Please also note that this paper is written primarily for small churches, although the same principles apply to larger ones as well.

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;
 - go to the person privately.
 - if he/she will not listen, take another person with you.
 - 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 which is often a process over a period of time.
5. Generally, if no other person is involved then that 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 where you do not always have to give a reason to others. Normally, you will not need to proceed further in a disciplinary action, 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, then the person concerned should voluntarily express regret to the church at a special meeting (depending on the size of the church), 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-
 - this will spread the knowledge of the offence.
 - young and immature members may not cope well with the information.
 - 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:

- 1 - Be sure that a 'prima facia' case is established. That is, that you are sure of your facts.
- 2 - If the charge is denied, make certain that the witnesses are prepared to give evidence, otherwise it is advisable to proceed no further.
- 3 - Act in every way in accordance with the church's constitution.
- 4 - 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.