

Stephen McQuoid

Church Discipline

Disciplining a church member is one of the most challenging things a church leader will ever have to do.

It is a task that is often entered into with trepidation, uncertainty, and a great deal of emotional stress. Anyone who has faced this from a leadership position will have the scars to prove it; it is draining and painful.

Sadly, church discipline is often done poorly – not because of a lack of desire within the church leader, and certainly not because the leader is bad. Instead, the reality is that, because people are involved, it is usually complex, often hurtful, and always unpredictable. Faithful church leaders are mindful of walking a tightrope – trying to balance between law and grace; dealing with sin yet showing the compassion of Christ.

But where does the balance lie?

In truth, the balance between these two – law and grace – depends on the individual. And because we, as leaders, are fallible, we each bring with us the baggage of our own past and

our own personalities. Consequently, the ‘balance question’ is never one that can be answered in an objective way.

I learned this when I dared to write a book on church discipline. Friends sent me reviews of other books on the subject which took a very different approach to mine. Thankfully, no reviewer complained about my book or charged me with heresy. However, I did receive some criticism. Some said that I was too much of a nice guy, while others thought that I was too harsh and judgmental. One friend told me that this was a sign that I had got the balance about right, but I took from it that church discipline is an inexact science which no human being or church can get exactly right.

This is an important point to note. In church discipline, there are sometimes no ‘right’ answers, but there are plenty of ‘wrong’ answers and the art is to take the least damaging route. This might sound fairly negative. Actually, it is not. Being realistic keeps you humble; it keeps you clinging to God. That is a good place to be when dealing

with the challenging issue of church discipline.

The context of church discipline

When considering church discipline, perhaps the most important thing we need to keep in mind is context. Understanding context helps us respond in a balanced and positive way to the challenges we face. So in what context do we serve?

A fallen world

First, it is self-evident that we live in a fallen world, where sin is all around us. We all know this, of course, but sometimes leaders appear surprised when their church members behave badly and require discipline. The fallen state of our world should not depress us, because we believe in the transforming power of Christ, displayed most clearly on the cross. However, given that our world is fallen, we need to be realistic about our sinful natures. Christians, like everyone else, sin. This is why we need the corrective ministry of the church.

The complexity of society

Second, we need to recognise that we live in a society where there is a lack of objective morality. Sins such as gossip, slander, dishonesty, materialism, idolatry, homosexual activity or pre-marital sex, may be an abomination to God, but they are very much the norm in society. That's the world in which our church members live. They are influenced by it. Consequently, any stand the church takes to deal with these issues will be met with resistance.

The challenge of individualism

A third problem we face is the extreme individualism of Western culture. We believe in self-determination. We believe that we are personally responsible for the actions we take. As a result, words like 'accountability' are unpopular. Many of us wish to be accountable **only** to ourselves. In church life this poses an obvious problem. Church members are often horrified when they find that they're being asked to answer to others, and especially to the leadership of the church. Often, they have never even anticipated the idea of church discipline. Indeed, those who

find themselves under discipline can become angry at the unwelcome intrusion of others into their personal affairs.

Despite this context – indeed because of it – there is a real need to take church discipline seriously. We cannot claim to be a people who honour God unless our church members are living holy lives. The credibility of the church itself is also at stake. How can the church take the moral high ground or be a voice of conscience in society, if Christians themselves are not pure? How can our churches grow and experience spiritual blessing if we do not live as God desires? Whatever our context, church discipline is a necessity. Without its restraining influence, the church is in danger of mirroring the children of Israel. Very quickly, we are liable to become a people who wander around in the spiritual wilderness while achieving very little.

Where do we go from here?

The big question is, where now? How do we deliver church discipline in an effective and godly way? There are no quick, easy answers. However, the following are some pointers that I hope will help.

Communicate Purpose

The first thing we should do is communicate clearly the overarching purpose of our church's policy on discipline. We need to show that church discipline is not just a way of 'slapping wrists' when people do bad things. Rather, as the body of Christ, we are on a quest for excellence. We want to be a people who live lives that are pleasing to God. That's why we take measures, sometimes drastic measures, to help us reach our goal. Using the analogies found in 2 Timothy 2, Christians are soldiers who endure hardship, they are athletes who compete according to the rules, and they are farmers who work hard to gain a harvest. The Christian life is about our transformation into people who live as Christ desires, and church discipline is one of the methods we use to achieve that end. This message needs to be articulated loud and clear from the pulpit so that every church member understands that it will be a feature of church life.

Prepare Well

The second thing we need to do is articulate our expectations, making clear what a Christian life, well lived, looks like. Church discipline is not just about telling people off when they do bad things; it is also about building them up, so that they live disciplined Christian lives. It is preventative medicine, not just antibiotics.

This will require teaching. Unless our church members know what God expects of them, they will not be in a position to live it out. Interestingly, in Matthew 28.18-19 (the Great Commission), Jesus specified that his disciples were to go into all the world *teaching*. It's clear that he wanted his followers to know what their responsibilities would be.

It is said that knowledge is power. For the Christian, that means understanding the connection between what we learn in church and how it applies in a practical way to our daily lives. In education, a great deal of time is spent thinking about both the curriculum and the delivery of the instruction. Each subject is carefully chosen, each course has a rationale behind it, each class has a teaching plan complete with educational outcomes and assessment. If we truly think that our spiritual health is just as important as our physical lives (frankly, it's more important), then the same care and attention should go into planning the teaching programme of a local church.

As well as giving attention to the teaching programme, focus should be given to quality pastoral care. It is interesting to note that the apostles in general, and Paul in particular, went house to house encouraging and instructing Christians (Acts 5.42; 20.20). This issue is of vital importance because experience suggests that church life is all about relationships. If we develop honest, deep relationships with church members, there will be much less need to take action when things go wrong.

More than anything else, there should be quality

discipleship. When all is said and done, the most important resource we have in keeping us from falling is a vibrant Christian life. Consequently, discipleship needs to be an absolute priority in the life of a church. Spirituality will not just happen, there needs to be intentionality. This is what Paul meant when he urged that we work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2.12). Discipleship is not just for new Christians but for the whole church. If we make this our focus, it will lead to stronger spiritual lives, and that is what a healthy church needs.

Approach the issue thoughtfully

Even when we have prepared our church well, there will still be times when someone steps out of line and needs help. It is here that we really need to have a thoughtful approach. The reality is we are all sinners. What is more, an approach to

church discipline that verges on the petty will neither deal with real issues, nor lead to healthy community life that has space for tolerance and patience. So are there guidelines that can help? I believe there are.

First, in dealing with personal sin, we need to ask if this is a chronic situation or simply an

isolated issue. There is a big difference between a young person who on one occasion has a moral lapse, and a married man who has been conducting an extra-marital affair for three years. True, both might be sexual sins, but any thoughtful assessment would conclude that one is a greater betrayal than the other, and demonstrates a much greater rebellion against the Lordship of Christ.

Second, we should separate out those sins which are committed in private from those that are in the public gaze. This may seem counter-intuitive or even hypocritical, but this principle is simply an application of wisdom. Private and public sins are both sins, but while some forms of church discipline can be done quietly, others require public pronouncement so that everyone knows that something is being done to remedy publically committed sin. The church should hear how the

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leadership has dealt with a treasurer who has stolen funds, while a person caught in sexual sin shouldn't find their behaviour described during a Sunday service. That's only wise.

In other words, there can be no one-size-fits-all approach to church discipline. Situations vary greatly and so do the solutions. Creativity and intelligence should be applied to church discipline, so that we can keep to the spirit of New Testament teaching. That way, we end up with the right outcomes.

So how does this all work out in practice? What should we do when a person falls, and what should loving church discipline look like? As I've said, there is no simple answer. However, there are some issues which need to be considered before we address each infraction.

First, if a person is involved in a prominent ministry in church – for example, the praise band – then it might be necessary for that person to step down for a while. In part, this might be necessary because their sin has become well known, and consequently the reputation of the church is at stake. However, it may also be the case that they need to step down in order to focus on getting their spiritual lives together before continuing in ministry. The specific measures taken will depend on the severity and the ramifications of the sin committed. It will also be essential to make a careful evaluation of the facts before taking any action.

In general, it is unhelpful to announce publically what action is being taken; this often makes the situation worse. By implementing discipline privately, a church is able to limit gossip and make restoration to full fellowship easier. Another consideration may also be the legal issues involved, which often require privacy. The legal position of the church is also important to consider when addressing public sins during a Sunday service – the treasurer example above would be such a case.

When administering discipline, it's essential that a good system of communication be established. A church member must know why they are being disciplined, how long it will last, and what outcome is intended. The leadership of the church

must be consistent and faithful to deliver on the measures that are implemented.

Let me give you an example. There was once an occasion when we disciplined a young man who had sinned sexually. He was required to step down from his ministry for three months, and we told him that he was to focus on getting spiritual discipline back into his life. We also stated that he should not take communion again unless he had genuinely repented and dealt with the fallout from his sin – all done to the best of his ability. This he did. However, what he desperately needed was spiritual support. Consequently, we set up a system whereby a church leader met with him once a fortnight for six months to pray and talk frankly about the issue. This took a lot of commitment on both sides, but the end result was full restoration.

Deal with problems swiftly

Speed is of the essence. In matters of church discipline, it's essential to act quickly. I'm not suggesting that we rush things – still less that we become judgmental – rather I believe it's best when we nip problems in the bud before they become bigger problems. So much heart-ache could be spared if only church leaders were more vigilant. A married man shows too much attention to a single girl, a teenager is mixing with the wrong crowd, two church members have an argument in the foyer, a businessman boasts that he is more clever than the Inland Revenue - each of these situations throws up a red flag. Serious problems could arise. It is better to defuse a ticking time bomb than wait for it to explode.

Always have an end game

Church discipline is not fun, and it's not meant to be. But neither is it meant to discourage and destroy. According to the New Testament, the purpose of church discipline is to bring the fallen Christian back into a loving and committed relationship with Christ. This higher purpose must always be kept in mind. If we do, this will positively affect how we go about disciplining a church member. Here is some guidance.

1. Relationship is essential. Leaders must commit

to establishing an open and honest relationship with the church member. Leaders must believe that restoration is both possible and achievable.

2. The church should be challenged to welcome the fallen brother/sister back into the warm embrace of the church family.
3. The mechanism used to discipline must be carefully selected so that, while there might be an element of punishment, there should be encouragement and help as part of the discipline.
4. In public discipline, the measures should be fair, and seen by all to be fair. Our common (God given) sense of justice should never be offended.
5. Discipline should be done dispassionately. In other words, we discipline because it is the right thing for the church and the person concerned, not because we have something against the individual.

Leaders should be mindful that church discipline impacts the whole church, and can often be unsettling. It is important to establish a common purpose among a leadership team (or among ministry leaders) so that in dealing with one person's sin we are not damaging the church as a whole. Church members need to recognise that there are times when church discipline is a necessity even if it is unpleasant. This education can be done in two ways. First, teaching on discipline should be included in a membership class, since it is important to communicate to new members that discipline is a feature of church life. Second, the church's preaching schedule should include discipline as one of its topics. That way, when it occurs, it doesn't come out of the blue.

(In our litigious society, it may also prevent legal problems arising one day. If all new members are made aware of the expectations of the church community – a godly life as defined in Scripture

– then part of that teaching will include the role of discipline. In deciding to become a member, each person would then be acknowledging the possibility of discipline should their behaviour fall short.)

Worst case scenario

So what happens if someone commits a serious sin and yet remains totally unrepentant? This is a major challenge, but sadly it does occur. The guidance of the New Testament suggests that when all else fails, we should resort to excommunication (1 Cor.5.9-11; 2 Thess.3:6,14; Titus 3.10). Clearly this is a biblical practice, but how does would that work in our contemporary setting?

The issue here is fellowship. The church should be a warm and intimate place where Christians love and support each other. Churches should be known as communities whose members go the extra mile to care for each other in practical

ways. These privileges are accompanied by the responsibility to live a holy life. If someone sins and refuses to repent, they have broken their part of the 'church membership covenant.' Consequently, they should be denied all the benefits of fellowship.

This does not mean that no one should speak to

them. Actually, it's important that someone in leadership remains in contact with them. However, they cannot expect the support, friendship and personal commitment of the church and its members until they have repented. They should be made to realise that they will only have the warm and supportive embrace of the church and its members if they do repent. Can they still attend church on a Sunday? Yes, of course, but the privileges of membership, including membership of a home group, ministry participation (music, social action etc) will sadly be closed to them.

Is this difficult and painful? Immensely. Leadership has many challenges and this is one of the

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most demanding of them all. Yet God remains faithful. He is a God of reconciliation and peace after all.

In truth, when it comes to discipline, church leaders will make mistakes. We have to accept that. As I mentioned at the beginning, this is an inexact science. However, if we move forward prayerfully, abiding by Scripture and filled with Christ's compassion in our hearts, we will see more successes than failures. Only by entrusting ourselves into God's faithful hands will we enable our churches to navigate the treacherous waters of our fallen world.



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Stephen McQuoid grew up in Ethiopia where his parents were missionaries. He then lived in Ireland where he worked for the NHS before going on to study theology. He has a Dip.Th. from Belfast Bible College, a BA in Biblical Studies from Trinity College, an MA and a PhD in Theology from Trinity Theological Seminary, and an MTh from the University of Wales. He has also written more than a dozen books. Stephen is the General Director of GLO (Gospel Literature Outreach) Europe, and travels widely both preaching and lecturing. He is married to Debbie and they have three children. His interests include motorbikes, football, SCUBA diving and reading.

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