PSC Policy Document on Church Discipline

1) What is the purpose of church discipline?

Every church has an exceedingly high calling- we are called by God to make Jesus known to this world (Matthew 28:18-20). The church can only do this to the extent that we are as holy as He is (Matthew 5:48), are as united in love as He is (John 17:22-23), and value truth as much as He does (1 Timothy 3:14-15).

Measured by these standards we all fall short of what God requires and every local church is a spiritual work in progress (1 John 1:8). None of us this side of glory will be completely the people we will be one day in Jesus Christ (1 John 3:2).

Ultimately it is God who disciplines us as a confirmation of our status as his children (Hebrews 12:5-9). He does this for our own good (Hebrews 12:10), and for the advance of his righteousness and holiness in our lives (Hebrews 12:10-11). Discipline should therefore be part of the normal life of any true Christian and any true church.

Much discipline will be self-discipline. We are called to be "self-controlled" (Galatians 5:23). As God speaks through his Word and his Spirit applies it to our hearts, a true believer will desire more of the fruit of God's holiness, love, and truth in their lives. Often the areas of sin God highlights through his Word, or through times of reflection and prayer, will be a private matter between God and the believer (1 Corinthians 11:27-32).

However, part of our devotion to God and part of our calling as a local fellowship should be a deep desire to see God's holiness, love and truth permeating all areas of the lives of our brothers and sisters and the life of the church (Colossians 3:16; James 5:19-20). Christianity is not a private faith. It is a life worked out in the context of God's new society- his church.

A lot of discipline in the church is formative, which happens through the preaching, teaching, and discipling programmes within the church (Ephesians 4:11-16), and in open relationships with other believers where we are challenged by their example (Philippians 2:29-30) and pray through our own sinfulness with them (James 5:16).

However, at times formative discipline is not enough and corrective discipline is needed. The purposes behind this type of discipline are to see someone trapped in sin set free and restored to full fellowship with God and his people (Galatians 6:1), to maintain the unity and purity of the church (1 Corinthians 5:6-7; Titus 3:9-11), and to honour God as we seek to make him known to the world by maintaining the church's distinctiveness (1 Corinthians 5:1-2, 9-13).

When formal, corrective discipline is implemented the rest of the church needs to be especially alert to the attacks of the devil upon them as he seeks to divide and destroy the church (2 Corinthians 2:10b-11).

2) When is church discipline needed?

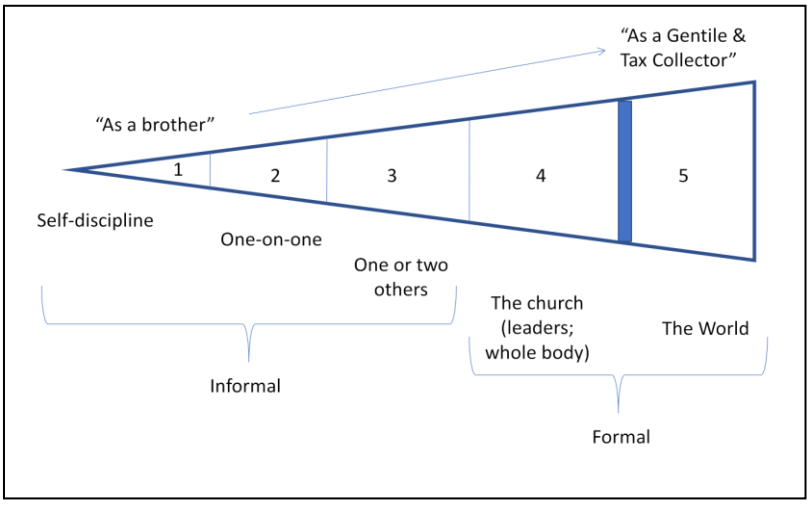
Church discipline is not needed in response to every single sin. We are called to be forgiving (Ephesians 4:32, Luke 17:4) and allow the love between us to cover over a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8).

Nevertheless at times in the church when God's holiness is denigrated by disorderly conduct (2 Thessalonians 3:14-15) or by gross sin (1 Corinthians 5:1-13), or where his love is not seen due to the breakdown of relationships between believers (Matthew 18:15), or where his truth is undermined by false teaching on fundamental issues (1 Timothy 1:19-20) corrective discipline is needed.

It is also the expectation of Scripture that true believers will work towards being more holy, loving, and truthful (Ephesians 4:1-3, 15 & 16; Hebrews 10:23-25). Therefore, those who completely neglect the fellowship can expect to be disciplined by the church (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15) usually by being removed from the church membership roll.

3) Who should be involved?

A lot depends on the nature of an offence and how it comes to light. The Lord Jesus described a process by which offences within the church could be dealt with, involving as few people as is possible. Jay Adams summaries Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18 verses 15 to 17 in the following diagram, adding the point already covered in this paper that initial church discipline is self-discipline.



He summaries the Lord's teaching in these words, "Basically, the rule of thumb by which to determine where the matter should be handled is this: deal with the problem on the level at which it presents itself, making every effort to involve no-one other than those already involved" (Jay E. Adams, Handbook of Church Discipline, p.37).

There are exceptions to this rule of thumb. For example, where a sin currently known only to a few people will soon be apparent to many others. For example, if a couple get pregnant outside of wedlock. In that case, even if the individuals concerned are repentant, the church membership need to be informed and, alongside offering love and support during the pregnancy, some sanctions on service and involvement in the church might need to be imposed. Another example would be if any criminal activities are disclosed then the police must be informed or if there is immediate risk of harm then other support services must be contacted.

Following the process outlined in Matthew 18:15-17, wherever possible, offences should be dealt with on a one-to-one basis (Matthew 18:15). The goal of this one-to-one meeting is not only that the party causing offense would repent and apologise, but that the offended party would be able to offer forgiveness. Depending on the nature of the offence, it may be possible for reconciliation to take place at this point.

If this private meeting is unsuccessful then one or two witnesses should be asked to listen to what has happened and meet with both parties (Matthew 18:16). If this meeting fails to bring resolution, then this becomes a matter for the whole church (Matthew 18:17a). This would usually involve the elders and then possibly the whole membership.

If the allegations of wrongdoing are against an elder, then one of the other elders should be informed and take the lead following the process already outlined in this policy document. Whenever possible, witnesses should be found (1 Timothy 5:19) but if any allegations of private wrongdoing without witnesses are made these should be treated with the utmost seriousness. Elders must be held to the highest standards (James 3:1) If allegations are made concerning the whole eldership, then the diaconate should be informed and agree which of them will take the lead. If they feel unable to follow the process in this policy document through, then they may choose to seek help from an external body like the FIEC or Thirtyone:eight or another trusted local pastor.

4) **What steps can be taken by the church to discipline someone?**

When private reconciliation has failed, then church discipline becomes public and formal. In the first instance the church leaders should once again seek to deal with the individual privately. In any meetings with the elders during this process, the person being disciplined would usually be encouraged to bring a Christian friend to offer emotional support and to aid communication: to ensure that the elders have understood the perspective of the person being disciplined and that person has also understood why the elders have responded in the way they have.

If no resolution is reached privately, then the church members will need to be informed, and sanctions implemented (2 Thessalonians 3:14-15). At this point various sanctions are open to the church. Firstly, all members will be informed about the nature of the offence either in a members' meeting or by letter. This should move the church to prayer and may shame the individual sufficiently that they seek to deal properly with the offence they have caused (2 Thessalonians 3:14).

Secondly, Paul is clear that we are not to associate with people at this point under church discipline (1 Corinthians 5:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:14). This could mean their membership in the church is suspended[1].

[1] The suspension of membership is different to excommunication (where someone is formally put out of the fellowship, removed from membership, returned to the world and regarded as an unbeliever) and is implied in 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15, where the congregation are told to "take note" of a person who will not obey the apostles' teaching. The word here means "to mark" the person, literally "to mark or put a sign on him". This would be worked out in the life of a local fellowship by the elders suspending a person's membership and then immediately informing the membership that this has happened (either by calling an emergency meeting or via email) .This decision would then be reviewed at subsequent members meetings until such a time that church membership is either restored or the individual is excommunicated. While under suspension, the offender would still be treated "as a brother" but one under the formal discipline of the church.

It could be they're excluded from areas of service within the church. It could be they are excluded from times when Christians gather for fellowship- such as Life Groups. It could be that they are informed that they are not welcome to join in the taking of the Communion meal with the church, as that is a demonstration of our intimate fellowship with one another. It could be that the offending party is not invited to church social gatherings or events (1 Corinthians 5:11). The elders will consider each case on its own merits and take whichever course of action they think will bring the person caught in sin to repentance.

The hope of all these steps is the restoration of the person caught in sin to the Lord and to his people (Galatians 6:1). However, if these steps do not bring about repentance in the life of the offender, then the person must be officially put out of the fellowship and treated as an unbeliever (Matthew 18:17b, 1 Corinthians 5:2,13b). At this point their membership of the church would be terminated and, in a sense, the church is marking the offenders return to the world and to Satan's domain (1 Corinthians 5:5a, 1 Timothy 1:20). The offender would still be welcome to attend public meetings and should be encouraged to do so especially when the gospel is being proclaimed. The hope and prayer for the church should be that the offender would turn to Christ and be saved (1 Corinthians 5:5b)

5) How can someone be restored?

The aim of all church discipline is to see God glorified in his church. One way God is glorified is when sinners come back into a right relationship with him (Luke 15:7, 10, 20-24) and express that in the way they treat their brothers and sisters in Christ (1 John 4:20-21). Throughout the process of corrective church discipline the prayer of those involved should be for the restoration of the offending party to a right relationship with God and with his people.

Restoration can happen at any of the stages outlined by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-17. It can be a private thing between two individuals, known only to themselves and the LORD (Matthew 18:15). But Paul also gives a model for the restoration of a person officially put out of fellowship in 2 Corinthians 2:6-8. Paul now says this individual is in danger of being "overwhelmed by excessive sorrow" (ESV) and the implication is that the individual is clearly repentant. Now there are three things for the church to do. Firstly, the individual must be forgiven by the church. This does not mean the church try to forget what has happened, but that the matter is now closed in the life of the church. It has been dealt with. The punishment has worked. It is time to forgive.

Secondly assistance must be offered. This could take many different forms depending on the nature of the problem. It should certainly assist the person not to re-offend in the same area and it would usually aid their return to the life of the church fellowship.

Thirdly, all sin is consequential, but some sins have profound consequences. It may not be appropriate for someone to serve in a particular area. Elders must be "above reproach" and have "a good reputation with outsiders" (1 Timothy 3:2, 7). As a result, some sins mean that a man is permanently barred from spiritual office. Other sins may mean it is unwise for someone to serve or participate in certain areas of church life either due to ongoing safeguarding concerns or to acknowledge the depth of hurt caused to others, even after forgiveness has taken place. In situations where there has been abuse or betrayal or other significant harm, it may be necessary to insist the perpetrator attends a different church, even if repentance and forgiveness have taken place. Ideally, the elders would help them make this transition into a new church fellowship. As part of this, it may be necessary to inform the new church leadership about the reasons why this has been insisted upon to protect others in the new church from harm. This would be essential if there were any safeguarding concerns.

Finally, whenever possible, there should be an affirmation of love of the church towards a repentant sinner. If the person was publicly removed from the fellowship, then once they have repented, they should be publicly restored with great joy. Our role model in this is God our Father who, in the story Jesus told, celebrated when his own prodigal son returned home (Luke 15:11-32).

Adopted by the church membership on the 28th January 2025