

## **HOW DO WE HANDLE CHURCH DISCIPLINE?**

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Church discipline is one of those things which most, if not all, ministers would rather avoid. And yet there are times when discipline is essential to the health of the church. "Without discipline", said John Calvin, 'the church is like a body without sinews'. Indeed, the Reformers used to consider the exercise of discipline as one of essential marks of a true church. To quote one of our leading Anabaptist forefathers, Balthasar Hubmaier, "Where church discipline is lacking, there is certainly no church, even if Baptism and the Supper of Christ are practised". So how do we go about it? How do we put into practice today the teaching of Jesus as found in Matthew 18.15-17 as also the teaching of Paul found in Galatians 6.1-3? In the first place, we need to recognize that discipline is a form of pastoral care, which always has the good of the individual(s) in mind. It is, in fact, a form of loving. Just as in a family children need to experience both encouragement and correction if they are to grow up to maturity, so too in the Christian life we all need to experience from one another both encouragement and correction. Discipline in this sense is not a 'big deal' – but rather just part and parcel of the way we relate to one another.. However, there are times, when church and its leaders have to get involved. In this respect perhaps the following guidelines might be of help. "Leaders have a responsibility for safeguarding the spiritual health of the church, which from time to time may involve exercising church discipline. The purpose of church discipline is to bring back a person to the Lord: restoration and not punishment is the aim. Specific help and support needs to be offered to the 'offending' person. Church discipline needs to be concerned for every aspect of the Christian life, and not just for sexual or financial misdemeanours. Church discipline in the first instance normally involves private pastoral visits by church leaders to individuals who are judged to be at fault. Only in exceptional circumstances, where the discipline of the leaders is rejected, should the names of church members be brought to the church meeting with a view to their suspension or removal from the church roll. Where suspension or removal from the church roll is in view, the offending member needs to be asked to refrain from taking communion, for the Lord's Table is not 'open to all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ' without condition; rather it is open only to those who 'truly and earnestly repent of their sins and are in love and charity with their neighbours' Church discipline is a responsibility delegated by the church to its leaders. Therefore on those occasions when a name is brought to the church meeting, church members should not normally be given an opportunity to express their opinion on the disciplinary action that has been taken. To embark on such a discussion would inevitably involve the leadership sharing further details, which would in turn undermine yet further people's character".

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