

Church discipline in the Bible and in practice

Introduction

The Bible has much to say about church...

- God gathers Christians to Himself, and into churches. Simply, the church is the “gathering” together of God’s people.
- God has chosen to use our life together to reveal the glory and power of the Gospel in our relationships, as diverse people are made one in Christ Jesus.
- The local church requires elders to lead it, and members to commit both formally and in practice to one another’s spiritual growth and care.

All of that sounds amazing... until you remember this: we are all sinners! That fact complicates life in the church very considerably. The business of discipleship – of growing into the likeness of Christ – means we have to take account of sin, the world and the devil. That’s why the Bible speaks to us about what’s sometimes summarized as “church discipline”

What follows is drawn almost entirely from a book by Jonathan Leeman entitled “Church discipline: how the church protects the name of Jesus.” It is highly recommended.

Historically, most of the reformers regarded the practice of church discipline as one of the defining marks of the church. What defines the very existence of a church? Faithful Bible teaching, faithful administration of the sacraments, and godly church discipline. Those are the 3 marks of the Reformed churches. (See, for example, chapter 30 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*).

In practice, this is a topic that most churches don’t talk or think about very much – until a crisis hits. And it’s one where we need to do some learning and growing together.

We haven’t yet defined from the Bible what we *mean* by “church discipline.” But right up front we need to remember that faithful church discipline should be *motivated by love* and is itself *an act of love*. How?

- For the individual, that he/she might be warned of sin and brought to repentance;
- For the church, that weaker sheep might be protected;
- For the watching world, that it might see Christ’s transforming power in the church’s life;
- For Christ, that churches might uphold his holy name and obey him.

1. Bible basics

(a) All disciples need discipline... all the time! – to shape us and correct us

To be a disciple is, among other things, to be disciplined. When we talk about “church discipline” we’re talking about being shaped more and more into the likeness of Jesus. This is something that we ALL need.

We can distinguish two aspects (which always go together). This shaping happens:

- Through instruction = formative discipline.
- Through correction = corrective discipline.

(b) Mutual care and love

Church members and church elders have a constant obligation to one another to do both – in order to help one another and the body of Christ as a whole to become more like Jesus. Consider these two texts:

Hebrews 10:24-25, “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

Colossians 1:28, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”

Basic Christian care means *caring for someone else – usually speaking Bible truth with them – with the goal of their growth in godliness.*

Two indispensable ingredients to this are: (a) willingness to reveal your own struggles; (b) willingness to listen and to help brothers and sisters in Christ by bringing the Bible to them in a gracious and faithful way.

There's a great summary of this in 1 Thessalonians 5:4, "And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all." What does it mean?

- "Idle" = a soldier who won't obey their commander's orders. So we confront sin... patiently.
- "Fainthearted" = your resources feel too small. So we come alongside to strengthen... patiently.
- "Weak" = all weakness (physical, mental, spiritual). So we offer help... patiently.

Consider: is there one other church member to whom you've been looking lately to offer that care?

(c) Dealing with sin: sometimes you don't confront it...

Part of that mutual care means dealing with sin Christianly. When we are sinned against Scripture holds out a better way than grumbling or discord. We are encouraged to pursue patience and contentment. How?

- Pray for God's help and mercy.
- Examine your own desires, confess any sin.
- Try to see other believers how God sees them (and pray for them).
- Watch your words: Don't complain / grumble / gossip... or seek affirmation of discontent. Rather, *confess* your own sin or *collaborate* in someone else's spiritual growth... or don't speak!
- Address someone directly if you've got a problem.
- Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you.
- See what blessings God HAS given you.

In other words, when faced with another's sin very often we'll want to put into practice 1 Peter 4:8, "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins." Very often in the Christian life it's not the right thing to confront sin. You just love your brother and forget about the offence which you've received. That's what it means to cover over sin.

(d) But sometimes you must confront and seek to correct sin

Sometimes, though, it is NOT faithful or loving simply to ignore sin. Sometimes sin becomes so grievous and so obvious that it simply cannot be ignored. It needs to be addressed directly.

Church discipline describes the WHOLE process of the church helping shape one another into the likeness of Christ. But that phrase is often used, too, to describe only the corrective part – where the church looks to correct sin and point the disciple toward a more Christ-like path.

Here are some key texts from the New Testament. Firstly, here is Jesus talking about corrective discipline:

Matthew 18:15-20, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

We notice here that there is sin. What concerns Jesus?

- That the sinner repents.

- That the number of people involved remain as small as necessary. It is a widening net of people. But it is as small as possible. (This is such a wise and kind passage that helps us when we have to confront another's sin).
- Most of all, Jesus is concerned that the church should look different to the world (to the pagan, tax collector).

If after gracious warnings an individual doesn't repent then the church is to treat that person as if they are a non-Christian. Why? Because they are unable to affirm the profession of faith that this person makes.

Secondly, listen to the apostles talking about corrective discipline:

Galatians 6:1, "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted."

2 Thessalonians 3:13, "As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. ¹⁴ If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed."

2 John 9-11, "Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰ If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, ¹¹ for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works."

1 Corinthians 5:1-13, ""It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. ³ For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. ⁴ When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. ⁶ Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? ⁷ Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸ Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. ⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- ¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler-- not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you.""

What do we learn from 1 Corinthians 5?

- vv1-3. It seems to be very different to Jesus in Matthew 18, with no warning but immediate removal. (We'll see in a minute that it's not quite as different as we might think).
- vv4-5. Treat this person like someone no longer in the covenant community. That's what it means to "deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh." Outside of the church is Satan's realm. You can't treat him like he's a Christian any more. The hope? That he may be saved.
- vv6-11. There's danger in failing to remove the man, because sin is contagious in the church of Jesus.
- throughout we can learn the several purposes of corrective church discipline: to present a good witness to the world; to expose a grievous sin; to save this man; to protect other Christians.

Here's an initial conclusion regarding corrective church discipline. There is a process involving both church members and church elders, in which sin is confronted and repentance is urged. And where persistent

unrepentance is encountered the church has a responsibility to act. Ultimately, that action requires a church to declare of a person that they mustn't participate in the Lord's Table or be a Member of the church.

This is not at all saying an individual is forbidden from attending the church's public gatherings (quite the opposite in fact). But it is a church formally saying that it can no longer affirm a person's profession of faith by calling them a Christian.

(e) Why do we find church discipline hard?

You can see why this isn't something that churches talk about much or practice much. It's hard!

Some Christian people have seen terrible sin ignored or brushed under the carpet. Others have experienced church situations in the past where a parody of faithful discipline has been inflicted on the church by ungodly leaders. For others of us we might be thinking of different "problems":

- Isn't church discipline at odds with evangelism? It seems to fit badly with our desire to reach outsiders.
- Isn't church discipline at odds with the gospel? If the gospel is about *forgiving* sin... and if *God* forgives sin... then why do we need to worry about correcting sin? Doesn't it conflict with the idea of unconditional love?

This is why it is really, really important to have a big Gospel framework for church discipline.

2. A Gospel framework for understanding discipline

Imagine a game of football in which you only payed attention when the referee blew his whistle; that would be ridiculous – we're watching the whole game. Similarly, the act of correcting sin belongs within a bigger framework. It requires us to have a Biblical understanding of the *Gospel*, of the *Christian*, and of the *Church*.

(a) What is the Gospel?

It is good news at the end of a long story of rebellion against God. We were created to represent His image and rule. But humanity rebelled against God, corrupted our own natures, and earned the penalty of death and judgement. We see that story in Adam, in the history of the O.T. nation of Israel (like Adam supposed to be holy representative on earth), and in our own lives.

But our holy God, motivated by love, sent His Son the Lord Jesus to be and do what Adam and Israel failed to do. He lived a perfectly holy life. He died upon the Cross, in order to bear the holy judgement which was deserved by His people. Raised from the dead He poured out His Holy Spirit, such that the church would be not only a gathering of Christ's people, but a gathering of people increasingly shaped to be like Jesus.

A thinned out gospel that speaks only of forgiveness and unconditional love (and that says little of God's holiness) sits badly with church discipline. A more robust gospel addresses not only the GUILT problem of sin, but also the CORRUPTION problem.

Here is an implication as we think about church discipline: The promise of the Holy Spirit means that we can expect transformation. We are still sinful through and through (thus we are humble and honest – like Luther said, we are simultaneously and always both righteous and a sinner). But the gift of the Gospel includes God's gift of repentance and of the Spirit. Thus, corrective discipline is a right response to bad fruit – because with the Spirit's help we can expect good fruit.

(b) What is a Christian?

A person called by God to union with Christ, by the work of the Holy Spirit. A Christian therefore has a new status: made righteous and adopted into the family of God – He is your heavenly Father. The Christian has a new nature: yes, still sinful... but with a new heart and new desires.

Also, a Christian has a new family. He or she is called into membership of a people. And the Christian also has a new job: to wear the name of God on earth, to declare his gospel, and to be united to his people.

Here is an implication as we think about church discipline: Jesus is Lord as well as Saviour. Corrective discipline is the Biblical response when Christian people fail to represent Jesus and show no desire to do so.

(c) What is a local church, and who is a member of it?

Those New Testament passages we've already looked at imply that the church has authority. In Matthew 16 Jesus says a little more about that authority:

Matthew 16:18-19, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

This is not a text justifying Roman Catholic papal succession! But it does say that the church which is built upon the teaching of the apostles has an authority. She holds the keys of the kingdom. Probably the binding and loosing in view here is the same as in Matthew 18.

The local church has heaven's authority for declaring who is a kingdom citizen. Local churches will make mistakes. But they still have an authoritative mandate.

Note: the local church's power is *declaratory*. They do not *make* someone a citizen of the kingdom (like the embassy of a nation can declare you a citizen and give you a new passport if you lose yours while on holiday, but it does not make you a citizen).

And that power is very limited – solely to words. (The church, for example, never exercises physical force, because the church does not possess the state's power of the sword). The limit is a verbal decree of excommunication.

Of course, the church is many other things too: a body, family, flock, temple, pillar and buttress of the truth. But there is an authority here, to which church members are called to submit.

(d) The importance of the bigger picture...

See the importance of the bigger picture? It's hard to talk about God's holiness, Christ's lordship, a Spirit-given repentance, and the Bible's vision for the church. But when we do we're being faithful to Scripture.

And, we're given the framework in which to practice corrective church discipline. It's not just about correcting sin or blowing whistles like a referee. God wants his powerful and life-changing Word to be set against the backdrop of transformed lives.

(e) Two encouragements before we go on...

- It's not wrong to find the Bible hard – and the Lord knows when we do. Study and try to understand these passages of Scripture. Ask for God's help see the goodness in his Word (because His word is not only true... but it is ALWAYS good).
- Corrective church discipline is critical. But it is a relatively small part of the church's life. And it ONLY makes sense in the bigger picture of a church where we're already trying to encourage, love and admonish one another. So, we are (again!) pointed towards the importance of mutual love, honesty, and involvement in one another's lives. And remember: it is a DEEPLY LOVING thing.

3. When is discipline necessary?

(a) Some preliminaries

One key point which we've already made but need to repeat: *we ALL need correction from our church!* Being a Christian means admitting that we are finite (we are small, limited, weak) and also that we are FALLEN

(every part of us is sinful through and through). Sometimes we are unaware of our sin. Sometimes we are self-deceived with respect to our sin. We need God's Word and Spirit – and our church – to help us walk more faithfully with Christ.

All sin is sin! There are no “acceptable” sins. “All offences, being sins against God, are grounds for discipline. This includes those which are private or known to few people, those which are public, and those which may not cause harm to others.” (IPC Book of Church Order, p.124).

We don't pursue every sin to the utmost. As we've said, there MUST be a place in a church's life for love to “cover a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). God does not perceptibly discipline us every time we sin. Nor should we!

We do not have X-ray eyes to see one another's hearts (only God sees the heart). We can only see the overflow of the heart, though we'll want to pray for a growing understanding of the human heart, for it is the centre of our being.

Often the right response to a difficult situation is simply to *spend time in 1-2-1 Biblestudy*, not necessarily even addressing what we think is the big problem. Why? Because the Word of God gets inside of us, and starts to stir a response – often in surprising ways.

Most often discipline does happen *privately and informally*. It's the normal stuff of Christian relationships. With love, quietly, humbly, a brother or sister in Christ addresses the matter with a brother or sister who's stuck in sin. It's an amazing privilege to come alongside a Christian brother or sister, to share with them, listen as one sinner to another, and to encourage them in the way of the Word.

The solution to sin in the Christian church starts by us *opening up our lives to other members of the church*. Only as we do this can we help one another grow in Christ-likeness – both through formative discipline and by correcting sin.

In this area, both church members and elders *need wisdom*. The Bible is *clear*, but life (and the lives of Christian people) is often *complicated*. We sometimes wish that God had given us a precise rule book governing all the difficult specifics of the Christian life. But he hasn't! In the area of discipleship and discipline the Bible is crystal clear – but applying the Bible is *not* always a matter of black and white. We need God's wisdom.

(b) When do you address another's sin?

The best way to approach this question is by asking: What matters to God? (He tells us in Matthew 18, in 1 Corinthians 5, and in the whole Bible's teaching about the Gospel, the Christian and the Church):

What matters to God? According to the Bible, God is concerned for: the sinner, the church, the outsider, and the reputation of Christ. My heart should be in tune with the Lord's. That'll help me decide whether or not I need to confront a brother or sister with their sin. So, think about each of these priorities:

- The sinner: for THEIR good must I speak with them? (It's not about getting something off my chest, or displaying my own righteousness). How wonderful it is to help someone repent of their sin now, and receive the joy of sins forgiven. Think of Psalm 51 – the agony of unforgiven sin, and the sheer joy of repentance and an unhindered relationship with Christ. Who would not want that for themselves, or for someone else!
- The church: sin is CATCHING. All through the Bible, God is concerned that we do not lead others astray. It
- The outsider: if a non-believer is watching, will this stop them from taking the Gospel seriously?
- The reputation of Christ: does it bring Christ into disrepute?

This doesn't answer all our questions. But when we encounter sin we'd do well to think about the person, the church, the outsider, and the reputation of Christ.

But what about the WHEN of more formal corrective church discipline?

(c) The key criteria: characteristic unrepentance

Formal church discipline (climaxing in excommunication) is warranted when an individual seems to happily abide in known sin. In such a person there is no evidence that the Holy Spirit is making him/her uncomfortable. Rather, *obedience to sin's desires is CHARACTERISTIC*.

Jonathan Leeman writes: "Formal church discipline is the appropriate course of action whenever a church member's failure to represent Jesus becomes so characteristic and habitual that the church no longer believes he or she is a Christian...It's not driven by lists of which sins qualify for discipline. It's driven by the single question of whether a church can continue to publicly affirm a person's profession of faith as credible." (Jonathan Leeman, "Church discipline: how the church protects the name of Jesus," pp48-49)

This helps explain the seemingly big difference between Jesus in Matthew 18 and Paul in 1 Corinthians 5.

- With Paul there seems to be no testing of repentance or process and conversation.
- With Jesus there are several warnings along the road before reaching the point of excommunication.

(There does seem to be one other *practical difference* between Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5: how widely an individual's sin is known. Matt 18 deals with sin that is private, and then more widely shared. 1 Corinthians 5 deals with a sin the whole church is apparently aware of.)

But how do we explain the apparent absence of process in 1 Corinthians 5? Here's a WRONG answer: "Jesus and Paul have different kinds of sin in mind. Matthew 18 is about lower level sin; 1 Corinthians 5 is about gross sin." No! It's not the case that the passages apply to different kinds of sin.

Notice what is absent from the situation in 1 Corinthians 5: it's repentance. Here is someone who is deeply and persistently unrepentant.

If 1 Corinthians 5 *were* a passage about "big sins" (not "unrepentant sins"), it would imply that excommunication were warranted even if a person repented. Because that's where the chapter ends up. Rather, when you look at 1 Corinthians chapters 5 and 6 you can see at several points that Paul is not concerned about sin that is really bad (though this sin is really bad). He's concerned about people who are *defined* by their sin. They are given over to it in a persistent and unrepentant way.

In 6:9-11 we see Paul talking about people who are and are not *defined by sins*: some people ARE "sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, practicing homosexuals, thieves, greedy, drunkards, revilers, swindlers." But by the grace of God that is what the Corinthian Christians USED to be. This was their old identity. Now in Christ they have been washed, sanctified, and justified.

But the terrible problem in chapter 5 is a man whose un-repentance means he can only be described as an "evil person" (5:13). He's not just a Christian who has committed an evil act, but he is defined by the sin: he is evil. And therefore he does not share fellowship with the church.

Thus, if you lay alongside each other Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 you see that "Paul's assumptions about the man BEGIN just short of where Jesus' process ENDS." (Leeman, Church Discipline, p60). Paul begins with an assumption of unyielding unrepentance. Jesus' process exists to determine whether a person IS or IS NOT unyieldingly unrepentant.

One application: even when a sin seems very big, the church must be convinced that a person is persistently unrepentant. (That's a process that may require time, conversations, challenge, warning, prayer). And the

amazing good news is this: when a person repents of their sin, Christ never says “That’s too big!” And nor should his church! Restoration and a wide-armed brotherly welcome is what we and the Lord longs for in such circumstances.

But when a person is revealed to be persistently and characteristically un-repentant, then the church cannot allow that person to remain a church member. Why not? For their good, for the good of the church, for the good of the outsider, and above all for the sake of Christ’s name and reputation.

(d) Another situation: a disqualified profession

Jonathan Leeman writes: “... some sins are so deliberate (like a long pattern of abuse...) or repugnant (like sexually predatory behaviour or extortion) that any quick words of apology would be unbelievable.

“It’s not that such sins cannot be forgiven, or that a person might not be immediately repentant. But some time needs to pass and the fruit of repentance be displayed before a church can responsibly pronounce forgiveness.” (Leeman, Church Discipline, p62).

(e) Summary

So what situations might or might not require a church to act increasingly formally in church discipline?

- Convinced that a person is genuinely repentance → no form of discipline (no exceptions).
- Convinced that a person is characteristically (not temporarily) unrepentant → discipline.
- Sin is so deliberate, repugnant or indicative of deep double-mindedness that a congregation cannot give credence to a profession of repentance → discipline, wait for trust to be re-earned over time

(f) Need for pastoral and situational sensitivity

Scripture is always our guide in working out what God regards as sin, and what repentance looks like in any situation. But care and sensitivity is also really important – in working out which sins require church discipline, what sort of discipline, and when.

Viewing the matter through the gospel framework outlined above allows for pastoral sensitivity in moving from one situation to another. (We’re not to be driven by a lists of sins).

What kinds of factors and situations need to be born in mind? Things like this: Is a person a new Christian? What are the circumstances of their life – for example, their family situation? After all, we’re talking about people – not rules.

Jesus’ words in Matthew 18 certainly encourage us to judge each matter carefully and fairly, consider evidence and extenuating circumstances, proceed slowly, be discrete, thoughtful and gracious.

What is the key indicator? It’s the answer to this question; Does a person repeatedly refuse to repent, such that their profession eventually becomes unbelievable and not affirmable?”

And what should our attitude be throughout such a process?

- Realism: we should be those who are poor in spirit – we’re humble, recognizing our own spiritual poverty and deep sinfulness.
- Hopefulness: God wants to make His church increasingly pure and Christ-like.

4. How should church discipline work in practice?

(a) Formal public discipline works best in a church culture where informal and private discipline is welcomed and practiced

“Accountability within a church is an implication of the gospel, and that accountability should ultimately be practiced throughout a church’s life, both publicly and privately... Formal church discipline works best when members already know how to give and receive loving correction. They do it in their homes. They do it over

lunch. They do it gently, carefully and always with the good of the other person in mind. They don't offer corrective words selfishly – just to 'get something off the chest.'" (Leeman, Church Discipline, pp67-68)

(b) Matthew 18 encourages a process

Individuals and then elders confront a person with Scripture, and encourage repentance and restoration. Over time, continued un-repentance might be met firstly with a rebuke and an encouragement to refrain from taking the Lord's Supper; then with a more formal exclusion from the Lord's Table; the final and ultimate sanction being that a person is removed from Church Membership.

Except when issues of public safety are involved that does *not* mean exclusion from the church's public worship. But it does mean the church cannot affirm them as a Christian, and their relationship with the body of Christ has fundamentally changed.

(c) Church leaders should lead the process

We all have a role to play in encouraging one another toward godliness, and that does from time to time mean confronting one another with sin. There is, though, a danger in getting close to sin. Paul says this in Galatians 6:1, "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted."

There seems to be an implication that spiritual maturity is required in responding to another's sin. It would be a reasonable assumption that the church's elders must take the lead in the church discipline process.

(d) The process should involve as few people as possible... until the congregation has to be involved

Matthew 18 makes this clear. Here are wise words from the Lord Jesus for all of us, as we encounter sin in the body of Christ. Charges must be established. Evidence presented. There's no gossip or hearsay. The benefit of the doubt is given, until evidence is adduced. And as few people as possible are to be involved.

Of course, some sins are *already* public. The very public immorality in 1 Corinthians 5 is an example, as is the public rebuke given by the apostle Paul to Euodia and Syntache in Philippians 4 (two ladies who had publicly fallen out with each other). Public sin might require church elders to say something to all the church's members.

And the most serious un-repentance is ultimately a whole-church matter. Matthew 18 seems to envisage the Members of a church being told *before* someone is excommunicated; it gives opportunity for them to lovingly pursue that person. And they need to be told *after* a person has been disciplined – they need to pray hard for that person, and regard them now as a non-believer, in hope of future repentance.

(e) Length of the process depends on how long it takes to establish characteristic unrepentance

There is no one answer to "how long?" A church and her elders will sometimes move slow... or fast... or somewhere in the middle in responding to unrepentant sin. (And the New Testament seems to show examples of each - Matt 18, 1 Cor 5, Titus 3:10). We can't see one another's hearts. We should feel a burden to be both gracious and careful.

What are signs that someone is going in the *right* direction? Here are a few: a person is zealous about casting off their sin; God's Spirit is working inside of them; they're happy to receive counsel, to change their lives, to make financial sacrifices or lose friends or end relationships.

We know that we sometimes fool ourselves into thinking that we "can have both Jesus *and* [our] favourite sin." And it "takes several rounds of escalating confrontations to help [a Christian] realise, 'No, I cannot. It's one or the other'" (Leeman, Church Discipline, p72).

Certain sins might persuade church elders that they need to pursue a faster process – maybe because public scandal or division in the church or false teaching is likely. Each of these outcomes might make for greater urgency.

Chiefly, though, the length of process is determined by how long it takes to convince the parties involved that a person is characteristically repentant or unrepentant.

(f) Restoration

What is restoration? It is the church declaring forgiveness toward the person and reaffirming his/her citizenship in God's kingdom.

When should restoration occur? When the sinner repents and the church is convinced the repentance is real. Sometimes that's easy to discern (e.g. a man returns to his wife). That's not always an easy decision following some types of sin (e.g. slowly overcoming cycles of addictive behaviour). But we trust that God uses church elders and processes to care for the body of Christ. There's a beautiful example of restoration in the New Testament:

2 Corinthians 2:5-8, "Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure - not to put it too severely-- to all of you. ⁶ For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, ⁷ so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him."

There's no probationary period. Just re-inclusion in the love, life and membership of the church of Christ.

(g) Church discipline, other churches and denominations

For independent churches, church discipline is purely an internal matter. For churches belonging to denominations, church discipline can in certain cases involve elders from sister churches or the denomination's own leaders.

Being part of a faithful, Reformed denomination (or having access to the counsel of other church leaders) offers both church members and elders a tremendous resource and balance in cases of serious sin and discipline. In particular, it is very hard for a local church to deal with serious sin in one of its own ministers, even if it does have a plurality of elders. How reassuring (and how necessary) it is to know that there are other church elders formally committed to the health and care of your church.

5. Lastly: a church full of sinners... yet becoming increasingly pure

How can we shift our minds, hearts and lives to align them more with God's vision for a church which is made up of people who know their SIN... and yet are becoming increasingly PURE? Remember that...

- **God is holy and following Jesus is a life of repentance.** Being a Christian is not just about a one-time decision. It's faith and repentance that yield a whole new pattern of decisions. God intends for his people to look different than the world. And what He wants from us, He WILL give to us!
- **The church is not a club that you dip in and out of.** Church discipline – and the reality of excommunication – makes absolutely no sense unless we realize the depth of commitment implied by church membership.
- **Following Jesus means helping others – and being helped by others.** We do need to be in relationships where encouragement, instruction and correction are normal. Sin is so sinful and deceptive. Local churches exist, in part, to protect us from ourselves.
- **Discipline – both from the Lord and from his church – is an act of love.** In Hebrews 12 we're told that the Lord uses pain in order to form us and to correct us. And he does it because he loves us. Maybe we have a faulty view of love, whereby love isn't love unless it's about making me feel special or my life easier.

Some of what we've been talking about here we *have* experienced in the fairly short life of our congregation. Some of what we've been talking about we *haven't*. In fact, some of it may feel quite alien or even intrusive.

Lots of it, I hope, seems just transparently wise, godly and biblical. And if we want to keep in step with God's Word and pursue the spiritual health of our church then this is one of God's means of grace to us.