

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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Church Discipline

Note: This is one of a series of articles intended to facilitate and guide church leaders' conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams.

Prior articles can be found at <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/church-leadership/> or <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/something-to-talk-about-archives/>.

“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. 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. 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.” Matthew 18:15-17 (ESV)

Every church I have worked with has a section dealing with church discipline in their governance documents. This section is generally based upon and includes a reference to these verses from Matthew 18. The governance documents provide direction for the steps required to remove unrepentant sinners from church membership, but they don't help us figure out which ones to remove. How do we decide which sinners to discipline and when to do so? Church discipline gone awry is a major cause of lawsuits against churches and church leaders, so we must undertake it carefully. And, because it happens so seldom in any one church, church leaders are often untrained and unprepared to deal with it when it occurs. Because it is a high-risk, low-frequency event, church discipline is something to talk about.

Let me start with some background information. Legal experts I have read and talked with note that churches are held to certain legal standards when they engage in church discipline. Two major issues often mentioned are that governance documents need to clearly articulate basic due process rights for a member accused of misconduct, and the church needs to follow their own written rules when engaged in this process. Because it's important that our church discipline policies are legally clear and that leaders follow them, we should review them from time to time, and especially when new leaders are added to the team or the board. I always

encourage church leaders to have a conversation with their insurance agent or church-law attorney before starting any formal church discipline process to avoid unintended negative consequences.

Here are some questions to help start your conversation.

- When was the last time your church staff or leaders examined and discussed your church discipline policy? Have you ever had your insurance company or church-law attorney look at it and offer advice as to its content?
- What role should grace, mercy, forgiveness, turning the other cheek, love, helping the weaker brother, etc. play in a decision to start or forego a church discipline process?
- How should church leaders help members who want them to resolve business or contractual disputes? Do we refer to arbitration? Act as triers of fact? Treat such disputes as sin leading to discipline and removal?
- How do we decide which sins to discipline? A brother struggling with addiction to pornography? Only sins leading to division and disunity? Only “icky” sins such as sexual abuse and adultery? Speaking of adultery, how do we address being the first to cast a stone (John 8:1-11)?
- Do we believe the church is required to do church discipline for a matter or is church discipline an option should leaders think it necessary? When might it be better to be wronged (I Corinthians 6:7)?
- We tend to think of church discipline in the abstract. Talk about specific examples. What would you choose to do if faced with these issues:
 - A member is arrested for child abuse. He expresses remorse and Godly sorrow during a pastor-penitent visit in jail, but pleads “not guilty” in court. The event is covered by the media.
 - A member files for divorce alleging emotional abuse, and his/her spouse denies it and asks the church to discipline his/her spouse for filing for divorce.
 - A member reports that another member, who had once been a friend, has grown distant and now “ignores” him. The other member says he no longer wants to socialize as friends because the former friend is relationally immature and draining to be with. The reporting party has confronted the former friend individually and with another person, and now wants the church to begin church discipline.
 - A member struggles with addiction to pornography (or substitute another addiction) and, though he keeps expressing remorse and repentance, he repeatedly falls back into his addiction. Another member recommends church discipline.
 - Just to add to the drama, insert children of elementary through high school age into the mix. What impact will our actions have upon them and their faith both short-term and long-term?

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I confess that in my earlier years as a church leader I was more rigid than I am today, and that I was more likely to pull the trigger on church discipline (and did so) than I am today. There are theological issues in play, yet church leaders come to different opinions regarding how to apply them in specific situations. Today, I'm more inclined to support church discipline for sins that threaten the unity and spiritual health and vitality of the church than for sins or alleged sins that mostly impact only those intimately involved or aware of them.

The key is not that you agree with me on this topic, but that leaders agree among themselves. And, it's important that we come to agreement before adding the emotional baggage that always accompanies such decisions in the face of an actual church discipline issue.

Being prepared and having the conversation before a predictable problem arises is what leaders should do. Church discipline is a predictable problem, and is something to talk about.

*Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.
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