

# Mistakes Shepherds Make In Practicing Church Discipline

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Reading Time: 4 minutes

God, in His perfect judgment, has designed the local church to be led by shepherds (cf. Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). They are to oversee the flock of God, watching on behalf of their souls, and all the while being aware of the fact that they will have to give an account to the Lord for their leadership (Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:2). It makes sense, then, that elders are to lead the church in practicing formal discipline. They are charged with the responsibility of “admonishing” (from the Greek *noutheteó*, meaning to warn, to counsel, to correct) the flock (1 Thess. 5:12). Mark Driscoll writes, “It is imperative that unrepentant sin and false teaching by [Christians] be disciplined by the church through its leaders” (170).

We need more faithful leaders in the church, eager to protect the purity and fidelity of the church of Christ. And one of the best ways for leaders (and future leaders) to learn how to effectively practice congregational discipline is by learning from the failures of others concerning the issue. I do not have in mind, nor am I pointing fingers at, any specific church. But that does not negate the fact that these failures are common throughout the brotherhood, and all Christians should expect better faithfulness to the scriptures.

Consider the following list of mistakes elders sometimes make regarding church discipline, based on (but somewhat modified) the appendix of the 9Marks book, [\*Church Discipline: How The Church Protects The Name Of Jesus\*](#), by Jonathan Leeman (Crossway, 2012).

## **Elders sometimes make the following mistakes regarding church discipline:**

1. They fail to make sure their congregation is regularly taught what church discipline is and why they should practice it. They make this mistake by (a) not asking the preacher to regularly teach on issues surrounding the subject, and (b) not teaching on the subject themselves.
2. They fail to practice meaningful membership, which includes (a) teaching people what membership entails before they place membership; (b) encouraging casual attenders to place membership; (c) carefully interviewing everyone who wants to place membership; (d) giving regular oversight to all the flock; and (e) maintaining an up-to-date membership list that accurately reflects who is present at the weekly gathering.
3. They fail to teach their congregation about Biblical conversion, especially the need for repentance.
4. They fail to teach new members about the possibility of church discipline, and that simply saying, “I withdraw myself” doesn’t work.
5. They fail to organize and practice a transparent procedure of church discipline, thereby exposing the church to legal risk.
6. They are so fearful of legal risks and threats of unpopularity that they fail to put their trust in Jesus by following His inspired command to discipline.
7. They fail to follow the steps of Matthew 18:15-20 or 1 Corinthians 5, depending on the circumstance. In a Matthew 18:15-20 situation, for instance, they fail to begin the process by confronting the sin privately.
8. They misjudge how quickly to move toward formal discipline, either by dragging their feet or by rushing into judgment.

9. They fail to adequately teach and explain to a congregation why a particular act of discipline is necessary.
10. They tell the congregation too many details about a particular sin for which they are recommending discipline, embarrassing family members and causing weaker sheep to stumble.
11. They treat the processes of church discipline entirely as a legal process with little consideration for shepherding the unrepentant individual's heart.
12. They give little attention to the differences between kinds of sinners and how that might affect how long a church should bear with a pattern of sin before proceeding to subsequent stages of discipline (see 1 Thess. 5:14).
13. They forget that they too live by the gospel's provision of mercy, and therefore prosecute the discipline from a posture of self-righteousness. Other mistakes often follow from this, such as an overly severe tone and standoffishness.
14. They fail to truly love the sinner... by not begging the Lord for his or her repentance.
15. They fail to properly instruct the congregation on how to interact with the unrepentant sinner, such as how to relate to him or her in social situations and how to pursue his or her repentance.
16. They fail to invite the disciplined individual to continue attending services of the church so that he or she might continue to hear God's Word (assuming there is no threat of criminal harm). Also, they fail to inform the church that everyone should hope for the disciplined individual to continue attending.
17. They put the responsibility for leading the discipline process entirely on the shoulders of one man, the preacher, thereby tempting individuals in the church to accuse the preacher of being personally vindictive.
18. They fail to be sufficiently involved in the congregation's life, such that the elders are unaware of the state of the sheep. This failure of instructional/preventive discipline will inevitably weaken the church's ability to carry out corrective discipline effectively.

19. They fail to teach God's Word on a weekly basis.

20. They allow the congregation to approach a case of discipline with a wrongful spirit of retribution, rather than with the loving desire to warn the unrepentant sinner about God's ultimate retribution to come.

21. They pursue discipline for any reason other than for the good of the individual, the good of the church, the good of the onlooking community, and the glory of Christ.

22. They fail to promote strong and healthy relationships within the church, and as a result, withdrawal of fellowship goes unnoticed and unmissed.

### **Recommended Reading**

[\*That Their Souls Might Be Saved: Revisiting The Neglected Command Of Church Discipline\*](#)

(by Kyle Butt). Peaceful House Publishing: Montgomery, Alabama. 2008.

[\*Caring Enough To Correct\*](#) (by Jimmy Jividen). Star Bible: Fourt Worth, TX. 1980.

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[Is Your Church A Hospital For The Sick, Or A Breeding Ground For Disease?](#)

[Discipline Isn't A Four Letter Word](#)

[Discipline: How The Bride Of Christ Keeps Herself Pure](#)

### **Sources**

Driscoll, Mark. "What Is Church Discipline?" *Vintage Church*. Page 170. Crossway Books: Wheaton, Illinois. 2008.

Leeman, Jonathan. "Mistakes Pastors Make In Practicing Discipline." *Church Discipline*. Page 139. Crossway Books: Wheaton, Illinois. 2012.