

Ebenezer Pentecostal Church

Auckland, New Zealand

Church Discipline Policy

Practicing Church disciplines at Eben-Ezer (As of 2015)

The New Testament clearly teaches that the church is to be a community of support, nurture, service, and also *discipline*. Admonishing one another is an important component of Christian love as depicted in the Bible, contrary to the view of our postmodern culture. We would agree with our culture that admonition based on nothing more than personal opinion would be presumptuous and arrogant. However, with the Word of God, we have a basis for correcting each other, and such correction, when practiced in a spirit of grace and acceptance, will have life-transforming power. Thus, Paul says, "And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another." (Rom. 15:14)

Scripture mentions various types of discipline, but each type is appropriate in different circumstances. Consider carefully what God would want in any situation.

Types of Discipline:

Reproof, rebuke, admonishment

Any errant brother or sister may be reproofed by the concerned brother or sister who discovers the error. Leaders should instruct members in appropriate admonition, stressing the redemptive nature of discipline over against legalistic views. In general, leaders should encourage members to reprove those whom they find in sin themselves, rather than "tattling" in order to get leaders to do all the discipline in the church. This leaves members immature and disengaged from others' problems, and contributes to the clergy-laity mentality.

While leaders should urge members to discipline their friends in most cases, we may see exceptions where the issues are too serious to be handled by young Christians. In normal cases, we should give basic instruction regarding the elements of successful discipline as:

- That initial confrontation should be done privately if possible ("And if your brother sins go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother." Mat. 18:15)
- That the one admonishing should prepare before God, discovering
 - scripture relevant to the need
 - ways to persuade
 - steps the one in sin can take to find healing

- positive vision and encouragement for the one being admonished
- That if the person is unresponsive to discipline, others, including leaders may need to become involved. Members should seek counsel on how to proceed at this point.

At this point, Leaders and others involved may decide that the issue is not serious enough to pursue further--that the one in sin has heard the message and God will take the issue up in the future. However, in other cases, we may determine that the issue is too serious to let drop. In such cases, the member who originally admonished the person should return, along with one or more brothers or sisters and together they should try again to persuade the person to repent. ("But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that 'By the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.'" Mat. 18:16). this could be repeated several times if, in the judgment of the leaders, further admonition is more likely to produce repentance. However, in cases where the leadership no longer believe further admonition will have effect, or where the sin is serious enough to threaten the well-being of the church, it may become necessary to issue an ultimatum before the church. Then, it becomes a matter of formal church discipline. ("And 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-gatherer." Mat. 18:17).

Formal church discipline

Formal church discipline is an unusual and extreme response to sin in the church. In some cases, our efforts to do what is best for the one in error, as well as our obligation to guard the atmosphere and holiness of the church requires to issue an ultimatum of some kind.

We at Ebenezer Pentecostal church entrusts the exercise of church discipline to you, the cell leaders, but under the general oversight and counsel of the leadership team and the pastor. Since this area is sensitive and potentially dangerous, be sure you follow the policies, which is for your protection. When disciplining members always follow Biblical principles for discipline, in a way that best fits both the spirit of New Testament teaching and the particular situation in the church. You will need a lot of prayer and counsel to seek out God's will in the highly individualized situations in your church. Because we are responding to varying situations, these procedures can and do change. To date we agree that the following procedures should be considered normative.

Removal from Fellowship at Eben-Ezer:

Removing someone from fellowship is a grievous and serious matter, and shall only be undertaken when all else fails. Since, church discipline is a matter of serving love, not legalism, a decision how to proceed will be taken based on what is best for all, not based on any legal principle. However, when appropriate, Eben-Ezer will take the stand God wants, not fearing other's reactions.

The following criteria's may be applicable for a removal from membership:

The person's sin problem has to be serious, along the lines described on biblical passages on this subject as outlined below

1. The person should be ensnared in sin as a part of a lifestyle of disregard for God's will, rather than an existential fall from grace. In a fall from grace, the person is striving to change, but meeting with occasional failure. Even people who are trying to change may eventually benefit from church discipline, because it can give them strength to resist temptation by underscoring the seriousness of sin.
2. The person should have been admonished at least once, including at least one reproof by more than one person (in accordance with Mat. 18).
3. The one in sin is not repentant. An absence of repentance means that the person continues to think that the sin is "all right" or "not my fault," or continues to lie. If the person claims to be repentant, he/she may get the benefit of doubt in most cases. The person might commit the sin again later, even though repentant. In other words, recurrence is not in, every case, proof of lack of repentance.
4. In normal admonition, the church may usually allow the person time to make a sober decision about whether to repent, rather than trying to force a decision on the spot. This allows the Holy Spirit time to work on the person. However, in extreme cases where the person has been brought before the church, the time for thinking about it is over, and a decision is due on the spot.
5. If the leaders of the church agree, and have consulted with the Pastor, who also agree that the case warrants a formal ultimatum.

What kinds of sin are serious enough to merit removal from fellowship?

Although the Bible gives no proof that the lists of sins calling for removal from fellowship (I Cor. 5:11; II Thess. 3:6-15; I Tim. 1:20; Titus 3:10) are exhaustive, Eben-Ezer thinks they should generally reserve this kind of discipline for the kinds of serious sin mentioned in these passages.

Sins listed scripturally as serious enough to remove someone include:

1. **Sexual immorality** (1Cor. 5:11)
2. **Covetous** (1Cor.5:11)
3. **Idolatry** (1Cor. 5:11) - Since idolatry was the major rival religious system of the day, it corresponds to adherence to contemporary false religious systems. Thus, persistent practicing of occult, mystical, or pantheistic systems could eventually result in removal
4. **Reviling/Slander** (1Cor. 5:11) - This may be the same as the schismatic. Clear evidence of a trouble-making life style should evident.
5. **Drunkard** (1Cor. 5:11) - includes habitual use of other intoxicating drugs

6. **Swindling** (1Cor. 5:11) - business cheaters - borrowing without repayment, or other kinds of stealing or cheating, including, in some cases, breaking marriage commitment.
7. **Division of the local church** (Titus 3:10, 11) - collecting followers in opposition to the established leadership.
8. **False teaching** (I Tim. 1:20) - The examples for this involve a central area of doctrine. There is no Biblical justification for applying this kind of discipline in a nonessential area.

In addition, Eben-Ezer believes that other sins, not specifically mentioned may call for removal as well. Examples include:

1. Various types of social violence such as rape, assault, domestic violence, child abuse, and premeditated murder (which could include, in some cases, abortion if not done out of ignorance).
2. Drug abuse, which is implied in the term "drunkard" (I Cor. 5:11).
3. Certain kinds of unrighteous divorce.

"Telling it to the church" (Mat. 18:17)

If the case meets the criteria mentioned above, the cell leader responsible for that particular area will meet the errant member alone and explain the case. The person will be asked to confess and repent his sin. If the person disagrees the cell leader will contact the church pastor.

The second time the cell leader and the pastor along with the elders will meet with the concerned person. If he is still unrepentant the pastor will involve the leadership team and take the decision as final. Member should call their church leaders or church pastor and explain the case.

1. If the group decides to remove the person from fellowship, you should ask them to leave then and there, immediately. Make it clear that the errant one must contact one of the church leaders before returning to any meeting. Then, after the person has left, discuss the situation with the church, reassuring them that by doing the right thing, they have honoured God and his word, and have given the one disciplined the best chance for repentance. In all likelihood, they have raised the church up to a new level spiritually. Pray together for the one disciplined and for yourselves, "lest you, too, be tempted" (Gal. 6:1)
2. Even if the person is not removed at the meeting, the church may issue a warning that continuing in sin will result in removal. It is up to the discernment of the Church leadership team and Pastor to determine what subsequent sin would constitute a wilful sin pattern, rather than a fall from grace. Chronic wrongdoers should be warned at the disciplinary meeting that simply saying they agree with the church and continuing to sneak their serious sin is not good enough. If someone lies to the church at a disciplinary meeting, and continues in sin, church leaders can remove that person without holding another meeting, but subject to Elder's approval.
3. If the person disagrees with the ethical position the church is taking, or thinks that the church has no right to speak to the issue, or demands the freedom to

continue with the immoral behaviour, Ebenezer Pentecostal Church would consider them as "not listening to the church," and they would be removed from fellowship. The person could also make other equivocating statements that suggest lack of repentance. The church must assess the person's attitude when determining repentance.

4. Finally, the church pastor and church leaders also have to agree that the offender is capable of terminating the sin with the provision presently available (i.e., an alcoholic or drug addict has been offered help and support). In cases where the errant one needs help, he should be called upon to avail himself this help. Refusal to do this could result in removal from fellowship,
5. In case the church judges a person to be unrepentant, but the person still wants to return to fellowship as soon as possible, have a plan of restoration ready. This plan will clarify whether the person is serious, or only wants to return to fellowship as a "love-taker." At the same time, it should provide the errant believer with important counsel and help in overcoming sin.

In some cases, people might be removed from fellowship even though they never met with the church. Cases where this could happen include:

1. The person refuses to come to the meeting of the church. If this happens, have the meeting as scheduled anyway, and discuss with the members why they are being removed. Refusal to come to the meeting of the church is considered "refusing to listen to the church" (Mat. 18:17) and is grounds for removal.
2. The person is flagrantly disruptive of meetings, or too physically dangerous to risk allowing him/her to attend even one more meeting. This last case is very unusual, but could occur with mentally unbalanced people who go berserk in a meeting or other gathering of the church, or who make threats of violence toward members or their children. If the leaders of a church decide they must summarily exclude a person, they should advise their church as soon as possible afterward.

After Removal:

1. You should let members who didn't come to the meeting know that the church has disciplined the errant member. The method used for disseminating the information should be selected by the leadership of the group, but usually should be handled through cell groups or one-on-one. Also explain to your members how they should handle chance meetings with one under discipline, and that they should not seek out meetings with the person (1 Cor. 5:11; 2 Thess. 3:14-15). Point out that the person has chosen to live apart from God's will, and therefore should not be supported in that decision by Christians extending the benefit of Christian love and fellowship.
2. If the person leaves fellowship during the process of discipline, but before a meeting of the church is scheduled, we should not pursue the

issue further. In this case, no formal church discipline has occurred. Removal from fellowship is only for those who want to remain *in* fellowship while pursuing a lifestyle of flagrant sin. People in sin leave fellowship all the time after receiving various warnings or reproof, and no special stand need be taken by the church. Such people have removed themselves.

Returning to fellowship after removal

Eben-Ezer refers to only one passage on this subject (II Cor. 2:5-11) and even that tells very little about the criteria for reinstatement. Paul says the punishment has been "sufficient" although we do not know exactly how he reached this conclusion. Apparently, a clue is that the offender was in danger of being "overwhelmed by excessive grief." This seems to mean that he has clearly seen the error of his ways and wanted to return to fellowship in "sorrow" (which suggests humility). An attitude that blames others for the sin, or excuses it in some other way, suggests that repentance has not occurred. These issues should be carefully examined before reinstatement, lest the discipline be insufficient and accomplish nothing. The following are the criteria for returning to fellowship:

1. Church leaders must agree to reinstate a person under discipline, consulting with pastor. Members do not have the authority to act without agreement of the church leaders.
2. Normally, the sin involved has been successfully terminated, or at least the person agrees to try to terminate it with the help of God and the Church, and has agreed to the leaders' plan of restoration.
3. The church leaders should also consult their pastor, and if they feel it necessary, they have also interviewed the person.
4. If anyone suffered material loss, they may need to be resituated, or a plan of restoration could be agreed.

Enforcing Church Discipline

Note: When exclusion from a meeting is used as discipline, the enforcement of this discipline should be left to the police. We do not threaten violence or commit violent acts in order to turn someone out of a meeting. At most, if a person is violent or dangerous, church members may physically restrain the person without violence, either ushering them out, or waiting until the police arrive. Church leaders should obtain the agreement of any host (i.e., home owner) where they meet, that a trespassing complaint will be filed against any undesirables who come to a meeting which they are forbidden to attend. In the case of meetings in property leased by Ebenezer, the right to control those who attend is already established.

Removal from cell group or other special activities

A person may be removed from cell group, special meetings, personal discipleship, ministry team, or other special activity for failing to comply with any of the rules or standards laid down for that activity. This should be done in consultation with the church leaders, especially if the

group is led by a single leader or couple. Be sure to show regard for the dignity of the one disciplined by offering a chance to change the objectionable behaviour, or in other ways addressing the problem.

When cell group have to come together to discipline one of their own, everyone feels the pain. But don't worry about your cell group being messed up or losing heart because of church discipline. The opposite is usually the case. Cell groups who pay the price of love for disciplining their own members usually find themselves encouraged and built up afterward. The church usually takes on a new sense of seriousness and vision for living for God. Those struggling with sin usually report that they were strengthened by the experience. Those being disciplined are often the ones most blessed by the experience. Many of our leaders today, even at the highest levels in our church, point to the time when they were disciplined as the key turning point in their lives, and the event God used to rescue them from a destructive sin habit

Non-members of the church.

As a family environment church, we at Ebenezer Pentecostal church welcome everyone regardless of their cast, creed, culture and colour. We believe that when we are unified to worship our God and Saviour Jesus Christ all the differences are blurred out.

At Ebenezer Pentecostal church, we always encourage people to join us as a member, so that we can work together towards the vision of the church, which is to reach out to lost souls with the love of Christ. Being part of the family means an extra step of commitment towards our shared vision. Sometimes, due to certain situations one/few may not be able to commit towards the membership of the church, this doesn't affect the party in taking part any of the fellowship services (Unless prohibited by authorities earlier), however, a non-member won't be able to take part in any of the church decision making process or influence any other members in the decision making process.

Disciplining Non-members of the church

Disciplining a non-member is a very rare situation. We at Ebenezer Pentecostal church try our best to avoid, however if the situation is unavoidable or something that may affect the function of the church, the church pastor may take an appropriate decision after consulting with the leadership team.