

Discipline in a Culture of Peace

Ken Sande



An interview with Ken Sande of Peacemaker Ministries.
Ken Sande says publicly disciplining sinful and wanton church members
is good for the church, and it's good for the one disciplined.
Then why do so few church practice discipline today?
www.christianitytoday.com/leaders/newsletter/2005/clin50124.html

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Church Discipline and a Culture of Peace

IT REALLY WORKS WHEN YOU MAKE IT LOVING AND REDEMPTIVE

How do churches need to think differently about church discipline?

The word “discipline” describes two aspects of church life. First there is formative discipline. This is the idea of bringing people to maturity in Christ the way a football coach disciplines his team through daily practices. This includes encouragement, practice, instruction, and showing them what is right and good. This is what a church does through its ministries.

The second category is corrective discipline. This occurs when someone swerves off the path. When a football player is not paying attention, when he is proud or defiant, the coach will make the player run laps. In the church when a brother or sister gets off track we use corrective discipline to restore and redeem them, to set them back on course.

How is this most effectively done?

Both formative and corrective discipline are best done on a personal level in relationship. A small group is an ideal place. Small groups can uncover problems before they get out of hand, and relationships built on love and respect can help a brother or sister remedy a situation early.

I have an example from early in my marriage. A friend took me out to lunch and gently confronted me about a joke I had told about my wife on Sunday. He was concerned that the joke hurt her. I promised to go home and ask my wife about it. When I did she broke into tears. I would probably still be telling that joke today if a brother had not lovingly confronted me with something he thought was hurting my marriage.

When we are in close relationships with others we can detect dangerous patterns earlier, and in a small group we have two or three others who can look into our lives. Only later, in higher levels of discipline, should the ecclesiastical order come into play.

What happens when a disciplinary issue involves more of the church? What should guide leaders?

Leaders need to understand the three motives for discipline. First, discipline is meant to restore someone caught in sin. Discipline should be a redemptive process not a punitive process. Unfortunately most churches don't employ formal discipline until offenses are so terrible, relationships so shattered, and patterns so engrained, that the chances of restoring someone are very small.

Secondly, discipline is used to protect the rest of the body. One church I was helping had a deacon involved in some immoral behavior. Nothing was done, people looked the other way because they didn't want to be judgmental. Pretty soon another person was involved, and eventually the pastor was caught up in the sin. Sin is like a cancer. Many churches are like a doctor that waits too long to do surgery and the cancer continues to spread.

The third purpose of discipline is to guard the honor of God's name. When the church knows of sin, and does nothing about it, people will not only mock the church, they will also mock God.

Can you give an example of a church that approached discipline with these three principles?

I know of a situation where a man was abusing the trust he had established with other believers. He was persuading elderly people in the church to invest in a risky business deal. After receiving thousands of dollars from them he was unable to deliver a return on the investment.

Church leaders approached him, and at first they were very understanding and patient. But they later saw he was stringing them along as well. Finally they put some pressure on him to return the money or face formal discipline. Eventually he did return the money.

But the more powerful outcome came through the disciplinary action of the elders, their counsel and teaching, and prayer. The man finally came to repentance and he uncovered his lifelong habit of seeking wealth by putting other people's money at risk. God convicted him and he requested to go before the whole congregation on Sunday and confess his sin.

Do you recommend public confession on a Sunday morning where visitors may be present?

On this Sunday, after his confession, one of the women who had been most vocal in her anger toward him walked to the front of the church and said, "I'm the one who needs forgiveness more than he does. I have been murdering him in my heart." She turned to him and said, "I forgive you, will you please forgive me?"

That is a Sunday you want visitors present. They are seeing the gospel lived out in a powerful way. In this case the sinner was restored, the body was protected, and God was honored.

Why are some churches reluctant to employ church discipline today?

Clearly our culture is seeping into the church. This includes a general breakdown in respect for authority, and the embracing of individualism, the attitude that says nobody can tell me what to do. And even the democratic perspective in our country has entered many churches, so people believe everything should be done in a democratic way.

Some think issues of discipline should be brought before the whole congregation. I have rarely seen that turn out in a restorative way. Most congregations have a wide spectrum of maturity: some very soft hearted who don't want to see anyone disciplined, and you've got the very legalistic and harsh. Bringing immature people together for a congregational vote is not a formula for restoration, understanding, and redemption.

Are there legal dangers for pastors and leaders as well?

We hear from pastors all the time who are considering disciplining a member for egregious behavior, but before anything can be done they get a phone call from an attorney threatening a lawsuit if the church says anything publicly about the member's behavior.

The average pastor tends to back off, and that is the end of that. The church may have avoided a lawsuit, but they will have done nothing to restore the brother or sister in sin or protect the church from further problems.

What are some things church leaders can do to overcome the dangers of using discipline?

Take God at his word. The Bible consistently presents discipline as an act of love and redemption. We have to loose the cultural idea that accountability and discipline are bad things.

Secondly, realize that preparation is 99 percent of the battle. Most churches do not prepare their congregations for discipline until a crisis hits. You can't just teach these things in one sermon. We need to be teaching about the blessings and meaning of discipline long in advance of a crisis.

It is also crucial to obtain informed consent. This is a legal term, and it is the only reliable defense against being sued. Informed consent means that the people in the church know what the bible says about discipline, they know exactly what the process involves, and they have agreed to submit to the process sometimes in the form of a membership covenant.

If we do not intentionally prepare our congregations for discipline we will undermine

its effectiveness, and leave ourselves vulnerable to lawsuits. When preparation is done you can proceed with discipline without looking over your shoulder, and without fear of lawsuits.

In environments where people are less committed to one particular church, how can we prepare for discipline?

I believe churches that allow a lack of commitment for an extended period of time is an error both biblically and legally. We should be calling people to make a formal commitment to membership. It used to be the case that you could not move from church to church without a letter of transfer. That was done to maintain accountability and discipline.

The situation we find ourselves in today is like allowing all the kids in the neighborhood to play in your back yard. If they do some really bad and destructive things you are going to have a hard time responding because they are not your children, and you are limited in the discipline you can use. Today churches basically allow people to come in and play church year after year, but when there is a serious problem they find their ability to deal with it to be very limited.

So the answer is a clearer commitment to membership?

We need a clear commitment to membership, but we also need churches in a community working together to discourage church hopping. In some communities churches have begun to sign covenants of cooperation saying they will not sit back and allow people to move from church to church to church looking for a new thrill, and causing the same problems each place they go.

Our present culture does make redemptive church discipline more challenging, but I don't think it is impossible.

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