

Church Discipline

The Study Guide

An Anabaptist Network study course

Introduction

Church Discipline

'Church Discipline' is one of a number of short courses for local churches that have been developed by the UK Anabaptist Network.

The network is not a denomination or institution but a resource agency, offering fresh insights from the radical Christian tradition on discipleship, church life and mission.

In the UK and many other nations Christians are facing the challenges and opportunities of following Jesus in a changing culture, and churches are coming to terms with being on the margins rather than at the centre. Things look different from the margins!

In Europe the church has been at the centre of society for so long that we need help to look at things differently. One source of inspiration and guidance for churches on the margins are earlier marginal Christian groups, such as the Anabaptist movement, which for nearly 500 years has been exploring discipleship, lifestyle, mission and church life from the margins.

Growing numbers of Christians and churches (from many denominations) are drawing on the Anabaptist tradition and looking to the Anabaptist Network for resources. As well as running conferences and study groups, the network has now developed some short courses for local churches.

Other courses now available are:

- Taking Jesus Seriously
- After Christendom: following Jesus on the margins
- Becoming a Peace Church

For further information about these or about other activities of the network, please contact:

Anabaptist Network: 14 Shepherds Hill, London N6 5AQ. Or visit our website and contact us by email: www.anabaptistnetwork.com

Explaining Church Discipline: the book

The practice of church discipline, though firmly rooted in the New Testament, has fallen into disuse in many churches. There are various reasons for the unpopularity of this practice, but it remains an important component of discipleship and community building. It may have even greater significance in post-Christendom churches if we are to be distinctive communities in a world we no longer control.

Church discipline has been a distinctive practice within the Anabaptist tradition through the centuries, though the way it has sometimes been practised has been problematic.

There is not much written on the subject for churches to consult who want to explore church discipline. The following books are all out of print but may be helpful if you can obtain any of them:

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: *The Cost of Discipleship* (SCM, 1959)
Bridge, Donald: *Spare the Rod and Spoil the Church* (MARC, 1985)
Coffey, David: *Build That Bridge* (Kingsway, 1986)
Jeschke, Martin: *Discipling in the Church* (Herald Press, 1988)
Lindsell, Stuart: *Relationships – Jesus Style* (Word, 1992)
White, John & Ken Blue: *Healing the Wounded* (IVP, 1985)
Wray, Daniel: *Biblical Church Discipline* (Banner of Truth, 1978)

This study guide is based on yet another book now out of print: Stuart Murray's *Explaining Church Discipline* (Sovereign World, 1995). The text of this book is available on the website of the Anabaptist Network and can be downloaded (free of charge) from there.

Using this study guide

This course is intended primarily for group discussion, but it can also be used by individuals.

We suggest that you first read the whole book through in one sitting (it is quite short) and then follow the pattern indicated in this study guide – reading a short section of the book and pondering (together or alone) the questions raised about this section.

You might also want to turn to Session 7 before studying the first six sessions. Session 7 has four case studies, introducing the kinds of issues that arise in churches that practise church discipline. You might jot down your initial responses to these case studies and then return to them after studying the book and the study guide to see if your views have changed at all.

Notes

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Explaining the symbols



This symbol invites you to read something – usually a passage from the Bible or from *Explaining Church Discipline*.



This symbol invites you to pause and ponder certain questions.

Session 1: The History of Church Discipline



Read *Explaining Church Discipline* p1-2.

Which of the terms used to describe 'disciples' do you find most helpful or challenging?

- Learners
- Apprentices
- Followers

What do these terms mean to you? Are there other words you would rather use? Why?

This chapter mentions other forms of discipline apart from 'church discipline'. With which of these are you familiar and how do these encourage you to be a disciple of Jesus? Which areas are missing or under-developed?



Read through Acts 2-4.

How did the various activities of the early church foster discipleship?

Which of these activities features strongly in your own church? Which are weak and need attention? What can be done about this?



Choose one or more of the following passages:

- Acts 5
- Acts 6
- Acts 7-8
- Acts 11

Investigate how the early church wrestled with difficulties and how these became spurs to more faithful discipleship.



Read the passages the chapter refers to from Matthew's Gospel.

Does Jesus have special authority to exercise discipline in this way, or is he modelling a way of relating to his friends that we can learn from?



Read *Explaining Church Discipline* p3-4.

List the reasons given for the neglect and misuse of church discipline. Which do you think have had the greatest impact on the practice (or non-practice) of church discipline today?

What is your own experience, if any, of church discipline? Have you belonged to a church where this was practised? If so, was it practised well?

Can you imagine how church discipline can operate as 'good news'?



For a brief introduction to radical movements that practised church discipline during the Christendom era, see the 'Other Radical Movements' section of the Anabaptist Network website.

Session 2: The Neglect of Church Discipline



Read *Explaining Church Discipline* pp5-6.

Have you heard stories of church discipline being practised badly – stories of abuse that resulted in pain and were destructive rather than healing? How have such stories impacted you? How have they affected your reaction to the term ‘church discipline’?

Think about the vicious circle mentioned on page 5. How can a church break into this circle and develop a wholesome church discipline practice?

‘In almost every strand of New Testament teaching church discipline is taught’ (p5). What examples can you think of – incidents as well as instructions?

The chapter offers five reasons for the neglect of church discipline:

- Cultural factors
- Fear
- Concern about being judgmental
- Unrealistic expectations of preaching and spiritual experiences
- Declining numbers

Rank these according to how significant you think each is. Are there other factors you think are also significant?

How would you respond to someone who says that the practice of church discipline shows that the church is intolerant and judgmental, out of touch with contemporary culture?



Read *Explaining Church Discipline* p7.

Four factors are identified that might prompt churches to reconsider the practice of church discipline. Can you think of others?

Which of these factors might encourage your church to put church discipline on its agenda?

Session 3: The Process of Church Discipline



Read *Explaining Church Discipline* p8.

How significant for the practice of church discipline is Matthew 18:15-17?

On what grounds is this teaching ascribed to Jesus himself? Could his followers have placed this passage in his mouth to justify their own practice?

To what extent does the context of this passage – the rest of Matthew 18 – address concerns about judgmentalism?

Stage 1: Challenge One Another



Read *Explaining Church Discipline* pp9-11.

‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ (p9) Is this a question people in your church might ask if the subject of church discipline is raised? Is it your own objection? How might you respond to this?

The chapter emphasises that ‘there is no reference to church leaders in this passage!’ (p9) What is the significance of this? Is it realistic to expect churches to practise church discipline with only minimal leadership involvement?

‘Is it legitimate to ask advice before challenging someone? What if you are wrong? What if you have misinterpreted their actions?’ (p11). How do you respond to these questions?



Read 1 Corinthians 4:14-21.

What do you learn from this passage about the practice of church discipline – especially about stage 1?

Stage 2: Take a Witness



Read *Explaining Church Discipline* pp11-12.

How do you respond to the following questions about stage 2?

- Who should you ask to go with you to your brother or sister?
- What are the criteria for choosing this person?
- How often should you go to your brother or sister? How long should you stay at this stage of the process?

Stage 3: Tell it to the Church



Read *Explaining Church Discipline* p13.

Think about the way your church operates, how information is shared, how pastoral care is exercised, how decisions are made, etc. How would this stage of the process be practised in your church?

Stage 4: Pagans and Tax Collectors



Read *Explaining Church Discipline* pp14-16.

Can you think of contemporary equivalents of ‘pagans’ and ‘tax collectors’ that would convey the same meaning as in Matthew 18?

‘Marlin Jeschke writes: “avoidance must say two things simultaneously, first that a given person has forsaken the way of discipleship; and second, that he or she has a standing invitation to return”’ (p15). What examples can you give of behaviour that ‘says two things simultaneously’?

Do you agree with this chapter that excluding someone only from communion is unwise pastoral practice, or is there a counter-argument for doing this?

Stage 5: Restoration



Read *Explaining Church Discipline* pp16-18.

What impact would practising church discipline in the way Jesus teaches in Matthew 18:15-17 have on your church? On you?

Try to devise a suitable ritual or ceremony to welcome back into the community someone who is being restored. You might also want to compose a prayer of confession that could be used as part of the restoration process.



Read the passages from 1 and 2 Corinthians mentioned in this section (p16).

What lessons for practising church discipline do you learn from these?



Read again the whole of Matthew 18.

How do the verses before and after verses 15-17 affect the practical implementation of a church discipline process?

Session 4: The Scope of Church Discipline



Read *Explaining Church Discipline* pp19-21.

Why do you think 'immorality was tolerated longer than schism or heresy' (p19) in many periods of church history?

Is any way of categorising sin helpful? Aren't some sins worse than others?

In some cultures Christians neither drink alcohol nor smoke. In others they drink but do not smoke. In others again they smoke but do not drink. And in some they both drink and smoke. What guidelines can you suggest for distinguishing between ethical and cultural issues?

The chapter describes four kinds of communities:

- Open set
- Fuzzy set
- Bounded set
- Centred set

Which kind of community is your church? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these various 'sets'?

Session 5: The Purpose of Church Discipline



Read *Explaining Church Discipline* pp22-24.

How can a church maintain the primacy of restoration as the main goal of the process of church discipline?

Churches that practise church discipline are often accused of perfectionism? Do you think this is fair? Is it inevitable? Does this accusation misunderstand the process? Or does the process lead churches into this temptation?

Are the qualities of purity and accountability attractive? Or are they so out of step with a culture of tolerance that churches that practise church discipline are incomprehensible?

What does 'judgement' mean in this chapter and in the passages quoted from the New Testament?



Read Galatians 2:11-13.

Is this a legitimate exception to the principle that stage 1 should precede stage 2? Or was Paul going against the teaching of Jesus here?

Session 6: Practising Church Discipline



Read *Explaining Church Discipline* pp25-27.

Given your own personality, which of the attitudes discussed in this chapter would you find most demanding?

The chapter mentions Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees for the way they admonished people. What examples of this criticism in the Gospels can you think of?



Read *Explaining Church Discipline* pp27-29.

The chapter suggests a number of practical steps a church might take to introduce church discipline to the congregation.

What might these steps look like in your own church?

How could you encourage your church to take one or more of these steps?



Read Colossians 3:12-16.

Spend time meditating prayerfully on this passage. Think about its implications for the way you interact with others. Imagine a church where relationships were based on these values and practices.

Session 7: Case Studies

Church discipline is often complex and requires prayerful discernment rather than legalistic application of principles. The biblical principles set the parameters but leave considerable room for manoeuvre – a liberating but frightening space for pastoral creativity.

The final part of this course consists of a number of case studies. They are illustrations of the kinds of issues faced by churches at different stages of the process of church discipline. These case studies do not lend themselves to easy answers.

With each of these case studies, first the basic principles need to be identified and then the various practical implications explored. What are you aiming to achieve? And how are you going to move towards those goals?

In a church where the principles of church discipline are not familiar, it might be helpful to use these case studies as an introduction to the issue. They could be provided for small group study before teaching is given on the subject of church discipline, then used again following the teaching programme. Comparing responses to the issues raised in the case studies before and after the teaching may help you discover how clearly you have communicated and to what extent this teaching has been embraced.

Case Study 1: Starting Again

Two years ago Central Baptist Church was rocked by the discovery that for almost a decade its treasurer had been falsifying the accounts and diverting some church funds into his own account. The matter came to light when the treasurer's teenage daughter told one of the deacons in confidence what she thought was happening. The deacon reported the matter to a specially convened deacons' meeting, to which the treasurer was not invited. The minister visited the treasurer, who initially protested his innocence but then admitted what he had done. He expressed sorrow and a desire to put things right. The minister prayed with him and suggested they meet again a week later to talk further.

The following Sunday the treasurer was quickly aware that many people were avoiding him or giving him strange looks. It was clear that what he had done was now widely known. That was the last church meeting the treasurer attended. Within six months he had moved with his family to another part of the country. His daughter declared that she never wanted to set foot inside a church again. The minister tried on several occasions to talk with the treasurer but he refused to see him.

At several deacons' meetings the issue was discussed and regrets were expressed that they had not handled the situation well. They decided not to press charges or ask for repayment of the stolen money, nor did they feel they could do anything more now that the treasurer had moved away. The issue of confidentiality was not discussed at any length: it was regarded as sad but inevitable that 'these things get out'.

Two years on, following study on the subject, the minister has proposed that the church adopts a church discipline policy to enable it to deal more wisely with any similar issue in the future. He has suggested the deacons might review the case of the treasurer and learn from it.



What mistakes were made?
Where did things start to go wrong?
How could the situation have been rescued?
If it happened again, what could be done differently?

Case Study 2: If she will not Listen

It had been a difficult two weeks. First there had been the soul searching about whether to confront Joan or let the matter go. After all, she had sometimes said cutting things to other people herself, but Joan seemed to be upsetting so many people and especially those who were new to the church. She decided she had to say something. She had plucked up courage to talk to Joan but was still reeling from the shock of her response. She had never expected to hear such language and she had almost been thrown out of the house. She had stopped crying now but the words were still ringing in her ears – ‘trouble-maker’, ‘hypocrite’, ‘holier-than-thou’, ‘busybody’.

What should she do now? She wished she had left the whole thing alone, but nobody else seemed to be doing anything and she couldn’t let Joan go on upsetting young Christians. It was so confusing. She had done what she felt was right, but it looked as though she had made matters worse.

She needed to talk to someone, to ask advice about what to do next. Who should she go to? One of the elders? Her home group leader? Should she discuss things with her prayer partner – who was a good friend of Joan’s? Or should she just let the whole thing drop and hope someone else would talk to Joan?



What should she do?
What would you do?
Do you agree with what she has already done?

Case Study 3: A Question of Culture?

Steve and Sally had come to faith in Christ two years ago through the patient witness of a Christian who worked with Steve. Together with their four young children, they had joined the parish church. They were made to feel very welcome and enjoyed the services, but they struggled to bridge the culture gap. After all, they couldn’t read very well and it wasn’t easy

to follow the service book or even the words of the songs as they came up on the screen. But they were making good friends and felt they were growing in faith and understanding.

They liked Bill, the curate, and his wife Sandra and they were pleased to see them when they called in one evening. But they soon discovered that this was not just a social visit. Bill started by saying how encouraged he was with the progress they had been making as Christians since they had joined the church. But he was concerned about certain things and felt he should talk with them about these issues. In particular, he knew they both smoked quite heavily and that Sally went to bingo twice a week. Was this a sensible use of their money? How did they feel about gambling? Of much greater concern to him was the fact that they were not legally married. He knew they had been living together for years and he had assumed they were a married couple, but Sandra had heard from a friend of Sally's recently that this was not so.

Steve and Sally were unsure how to react. They could tell Bill was not trying to make trouble and that he was concerned for their welfare. But what was wrong with smoking and bingo? They needed to relax sometimes. As for their not being married, what difference did a piece of paper make? They hadn't had much money at the time and decided not to bother with the expense of a proper wedding. Who had told Sandra anyway and why?



Are Bill and Sandra acting wisely here?
Which of these issues matters for church discipline, and which are just cultural differences?
How should Steve and Sally respond?
What should Bill and Sandra do next?

Case Study 4: Telling the Church

Agape Christian Fellowship had grown over the past twelve years from a small cell group meeting in a home to a church of some 275 people meeting in three congregations across the town. The leadership team, which was responsible for all three congregations, was led by Margaret and was due to meet this evening. Margaret was in her study preparing for the meeting.

The main item on the agenda was a painful church discipline issue. Three months earlier she had wept with Judy as she heard how Judy's husband, Peter, had left her and had moved in with Fiona, a single woman in another congregation in the church. Several visits to Peter and Fiona, on her own and accompanied by two other leaders, seemed to have achieved little except to harden their determination to carry on with this relationship. They had also told her that if the leaders made a public statement criticising them they would go straight to the local press and accuse the church of being judgemental.

Margaret was clear in her own mind that the next step was to explain the situation to the church. But how should this be done? Should all three congregations be informed or just the ones to which Peter, Judy and Fiona belonged? What should the church be asked to do, if

anything? How would Judy feel about the situation? How seriously should they take the threat made by Peter and Fiona? How would this affect the church's reputation in the area?



What would you advise Margaret to propose to her leadership team?

Case Study 5: Welcome Back

Richard, the pastor of South Street Church, had just put the telephone down when it rang again. This time it was one of the deacons, Tony, who had also received a telephone call from a seemingly repentant David. A year earlier David had been disciplined by the church for being persistently divisive, spreading rumours about several members and refusing to respond to all attempts to help him confront this issue. David had stayed away from church activities and had had little contact with members of the church. Now he had rung both Richard and Tony to say that God had spoken to him about his behaviour and that he wanted to apologise to the church and be restored to membership.

Richard and Tony compared notes and discovered that David had said almost exactly the same to each of them about his change of heart. However, he had given Richard the impression that he expected Richard to be cautious about restoring him, but he had told Tony that he felt sure Tony would want to act on this straight away. How should they interpret this? Was David still trying to be divisive? Was this deliberate or just bad habit? Or were they reading too much into his words?

Richard and Tony continued to discuss the situation. How could they test his new attitude? How soon should they allow him to talk to the church? Should they let him say what he wanted or talk it through with him first? If his change of heart was genuine, how should they mark his restoration to membership? This was the first time anyone they had disciplined had asked to return – an exciting development if he was sincere. How could they use this as a learning experience for the church and as a time of healing and restoration for David? What should they encourage church members to do, especially those who had been hurt by David?



How would you advise Richard and Tony?