

# Why Assembly Discipline is Broken, And How to Fix It

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## Our Discipline Process Is Broken

One part of the legacy of truth passed down to me as a young person growing up in Gospel Hall assemblies is the statement that “Discipline is for restoration.”

I wholeheartedly agree. And yet, at the same time, I have come to realize that the discipline process we use is often more harmful than helpful, and restoration happens too rarely.

So I ask myself if what we practice is Biblical, why does it not work? Surely we must question if our practice is genuinely Biblical! Is it possible our interpretation and application of the relevant Scriptures are incorrect or incomplete? My assumption here is that God is at least reasonably proficient at designing redemptive processes(!)...and yet this one is not working most of the time. Why is that? What is wrong with how we’ve interpreted this process from Scripture?

We’ll address these concerns throughout the article. But let me begin with a few observed deficiencies.

## Our Inherent Punishment Mentality

Could it be that most of our discipline is not proper discipline? Instead, it is just punishment.

It’s a punitive response to a “crossed-the-line” behaviour. When you go too far, the discipline involves public judgment and sentencing where you are excommunicated. Sadly, we often neglect the shepherding follow-up after excommunication.

When the process is more like a social execution than a journey of loving confrontation and redemption, it should be no surprise that restoration is very rare.

The deficiency here is the lack of restorative interventions before, during, and even after the discipline meeting.

## It Can Be Unfair

In the assemblies, we most commonly discipline fornication. That usually means sexual intercourse, although some assemblies would extend it to oral sex or other activities in that “is-that-really-sex?” department. Very few assemblies will discipline for all forms of extra-marital sexual activity (e.g., physical affection other than intercourse) because it’s difficult to know where to draw the line.

Since we have this “do not cross the line” kind of standard, we cannot discipline other types of sexual behaviour. Allow me this example to illustrate: you have a young couple, going on well for the Lord, due to be married in 4 months. Things get too heated on Friday night, and they cross the line. They come to you in tears and with a great deal of remorse. Regrettably, but accounting for God’s holy standard, you proceed to excommunicate them within the week

and make this known to the assembly. They'll carry a lifelong stigma for their error.

Next example: a wife comes to you in tears after her husband has disclosed that he's been using pornography for the ten years they've been married. You console her. You speak to him to confirm there hasn't been any extra-marital activity, and you let him go with a stern warning. He continues to struggle, but there is no discipline because there's no sexual intercourse between him and another woman. What you may or may not see is the emotional destruction on his wife: the devastating effects of betrayal trauma, the erosion of her self-image and self-confidence, her hypervigilance about his behaviours, the fact that his oldest child discovered his pornography addiction and is now stuck in the same sin...the list of consequences could go on.

Between these two examples: which one is the more severe scenario? And which one receives the discipline?

As we shall see, our misunderstanding of how discipline ought to be carried out and our misunderstanding of what "fornication" means leads to this unfairness and the injustice experienced by the wife in the second scenario. And if the young couple knew of this second situation: think of the injustice they would feel. Why were they disciplined and not the other husband?

The deficiency here is that if your most common discipline is for pre-marital sex, based on "fornication" in 1 Corinthians 5, then as elders, you are missing out on a host of other opportunities to intervene in the lives of the Lord's people to help them break free of the clutches of different forms of sexual sin. Remember: fornication (gr. *pornois*, better translated as "sexual immorality" in 1 Corinthians 5) certainly includes extra-marital sex, but the word is a broad moniker for the full gamut of sexual sin. When we only focus on extra-marital sex, we fail to exhort God's people to strive for complete sexual holiness.

## Jack In The Box

Another shortcoming in our current practice is the jack-in-the-box issue. You know how those work: the old toy where you wind and wind and wind the handle around until, unpredictably, "WHAM!" It pops out and scares the daylights out of you!

I've been guilty of this in my service as an overseer: we can all see the train wreck coming, but we don't do anything, and we don't do anything (usually because we have no clear evidence, or just worry or suspicion...the handle is winding up, however!) and then "WHAM!" we find out and go into full judge, jury and executioner mode. Afterwards, we're left with an unsettled feeling that, while we did the right thing, maybe it came across as a little harsh and was too drastic...

Where's the restoration in this approach?

In fairness, the person often hides the sin until there's some form of disclosure or discovery. Sometimes, we just hope that what we think might be happening is not happening. However, that raises another shortcoming of this approach: when the only concept of discipline is ex-communication, it encourages hiding sin in its earlier, less virile stages. Sinning saints near the top of the slippery slope don't seek help to be restored to the Lord until the thing has progressed to the point of no return. This is regrettable as well: what if we could intervene much earlier and help them avoid spiritual shipwreck?

Let me put the question to you another way: what would have to change regarding your assembly's approach to discipline in order for people struggling with sexual sin to approach you willingly and much sooner to ask for help with restoration to the Lord? I'll attempt to answer this question as we proceed.

Of course, these are not all of the deficiencies. Sometimes assembly discipline is used abusively and unbiblically by spiritual bullies in leadership positions. Other times it is applied by sincere elders when it really does not need to be. In other cases, it's the right thing to do but is administered in such a harsh and unloving manner that deep wounds are created alongside the scars of sin. And other times it is not carried

out when it should be. In some cases, it is so difficult to know exactly what to do.

Thus, even a revised or more Biblical approach to discipline would still be susceptible to human failure. And, to be fair, some believers have gone through the classic approach to discipline and have benefited from it. Regardless, if we pause to think back through those who have been disciplined from our assemblies, I am sure we would agree that the vast majority were not restored to the assembly. That is also an indication that the process we use is problematic. God's methods should work, human failing notwithstanding.

With that, I'd like to propose another approach to discipline that is more restorative. I think it is also more biblical, but this is also just my best understanding of the Scriptures right now and that means I am continuing to learn and grapple with this subject.

Let's begin with the question, "When should the process of discipline begin?"

## Discipline Starts With a Conversation

Not with a discipline meeting.

Too often, while we state that discipline is for restoration, it often ends up looking like an execution. It is the termination of a person's relationship with the assembly.

This makes restoration very difficult. We proceed straight to ex-communication because we only consider 1 Corinthians 5 when we look into the Scriptures for how to discipline a sinning believer.

What I'd like you to do is consider Matthew 18:15-20. It is widely accepted that the context of this passage is a discipline meeting (particularly verses 17-20). Now, there is very little detail given since the Lord articulated it prior to the establishment of the church, which is His body, and before the more detailed teaching on the doctrine of the local church. Nevertheless, we can learn from these verses.

Consider verse 17:

*And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and tax collector (NKJV)*

The last part of verse 17 is expanded in 1 Corinthians 5, where the Apostle Paul describes in great detail the final step in the discipline process of a believer who has refused to be restored to the Lord and his church family.

## Discipline Involves Escalating Intervention

Taking this passage in Matthew 18 together with 1 Corinthians 5 helps us see that there is a process for overseers to follow. Discipline as a means of restoration should be a shepherding process that begins with a conversation with the sinning saint.

Let's examine the passage together:

*15 "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' 17 And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.*

*18 "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*

*19 "Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in*

*heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”*

## **Step One: Confront the Sin Privately**

This is what I was referring to when I said discipline must begin with a conversation. First, an overseer can speak to a brother or sister who is sinning: whether it is a sin worthy of discipline or not.

Verse 15 is ideally handled by the believer who has been sinned against. However, the verse should not be restricted to this circumstance. Suppose an overseer sees or is made aware of a grave sin that has occurred (or a sin that could snowball into a more significant problem). In that case, it is his prerogative to immediately and lovingly confront the believer who has sinned.

The purpose of the conversation in verse 15 is to identify the sin and call the sinning believer to repentance. Sometimes, this believer will already have recognized the egregious nature of their sin, and repentance will be immediate if not already evident.

In either case, if the erring believer “Hears you,” then the matter is settled. The idea in the word “hears” is that of a conforming response. In other words, repentance is evident in the person’s agreement with your discipline and his/her conformity to it. They are siding with your judgment against their sin, recognizing the error that has occurred and, if necessary, making the amends that must be made.

If this kind of repentant, contrite response is evident and is backed up by consistent care not to return to or repeat the same sin, then the discipline is complete. No further action is necessary: “You have gained your brother.” S/He has been won over to righteousness. Their life has been brought in conformity to Christ and to the Gospel, which they claim has transformed them.

This is how discipline begins with a conversation. Ideally, discipline will also be completed at this stage, and no further action is necessary.

## **Step 2: Confront the Sin With Other Witnesses**

Suppose the sinning believer does not respond to the one-on-one confrontation with repentance. In that case, we are instructed to take one or two more people with us so that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established’ (NKJV, a quote from Deuteronomy 19:15).

The only reason why step 2 in the process has been engaged is that the outcome of step 1 has not been achieved. The brother or sister has not repented.

I would take it that the witnesses could be direct witnesses because they are observers (i.e., actual, literal witnesses) of the sin that has occurred. Thus, if the offending believer is in denial or is trying to hide or minimize or otherwise escape accountability, surely the presence of others who have observed the sin will convince them that there is no escaping the need for them to address the sin, repent and return to following the Lord.

However, it is also possible that the “one or two more” could be other overseers who are now joining in the confrontation. Instead of being literal witnesses to the sin, they attest to the evidence of the sin and join the conversation to urge the believer towards repentance. Some sins are evident but not witnessed. Thus, the duty of the witnesses would be to serve as a judicial panel to witness the confrontation of the sin that is being addressed for the purpose of restoration.

The hope here is that the believer who is in denial or refusing to acknowledge the problem will now awaken to the reality that two or three people are saying, “This sin must stop.” Ideally, in the face of such stern rebuke and accountability s/he will repent and turn from this sin to return to following Christ as Lord. In some cases of grave sin, the restoration process may take several months or even a year or two.

The sinning believer must understand that it is their choice, not the overseers’ choice, which will result in either restoration or continuation of the discipline process. It’s clear from the start of verse 17 that the

purpose of this second step remains the same as the first: recognition of and repentance from sin.

### **Step 3: The Assembly Confronts the Sin**

As the person is unable to face and accept the seriousness of the sin, the discipline process continues. The hope that is this third stage will present such an extraordinary and significant rebuke that the person will turn from their sin in humble repentance.

I would take it from the “but” in verse 17 (“But if he refuses even to hear the church”) that there are two steps here: the telling to the church is a separate event from the accounting of the person as a heathen and tax collector.

Thus, this stage is a public communication to the local assembly that informs them of the egregious nature of the sin and especially the ongoing unrepentant of the guilty party. The assembly, which is now incorporated into this discipline/restoration process, is now invited to join in rebuking the sinning believer. There is still no ex-communication at this point.

While a person would need to be in a relatively significant state of unrepentance and denial, the hope again is that with the entire assembly saying to this person that their sin must stop, that they would listen and hear and understand the need to repent and make the serious changes necessary to be restored to the Lord.

It has to be made clear to the person that their sin has offended God, that it is damaging to their growth in Christ and grievous to the Holy Spirit, and that it also is impacting others negatively. With the public announcement of this sin and the loving confrontation of the entire community of believers, the person ought to be able to recognize the serious nature of the sin through the lens of such a broad, encompassing rebuke.

It would also be suitable to warn the individual that if they do not turn from their sin, the assembly will be forced to move on to the final act of discipline: ex-communication.

### **Step 4: Excommunication**

There is no higher *spiritual* authority on earth than the rebuke of the local church. Suppose the person will not submit and recognize the authority they are being confronted with, will not recognize the severity of their unrepentance, and will not accept the need to turn from their sin. In that case, ex-communication is the next logical step.

In the context of Matthew 18, the disciples would have understood clearly that the “heathen and tax collector” would be stereotypical descriptions of the kind of person who clearly was not part of the family of God’s people and also did not belong among the community of God’s people. Because of this person’s defiant response to the discipline thus far and their ongoing commitment to their sin, one could only conclude that such a person must be counted as an unbeliever. They are unwilling to submit to the authority of Christ on earth and to the authority of the Gospel in their lives, including the reality of being made a new creature in Christ Jesus.

As such, this blatant preference towards sin over redemption and restoration can only indicate that this person does not have divine life, nor do they wish to be a follower of Jesus Christ. They want to be a follower of their sin. And they do so with no regard towards the impact their sin is having on the testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This person has no place in the community of the Lord’s people. Excommunication is a very appropriate response at this stage.

Coupled with the teaching of 1 Corinthians 5, this person must be put away: expelled from the membership of the local assembly. This is the final step in the escalating intervention. Once the person is put out of the assembly, they enter the realm of Satan, where the continuation of their behaviour will result in self-destruction. The hope is that even though the person has been rebellious even to this extent, this final process of experiencing the full consequence of their sin may result in repentance from that sin and a laying hold of the power of the gospel in their life so that they may be saved (1 Corinthians 5:5). By “saved,” I mean either to be born again or to be saved

from the grip of this particular sin and restored to the Lord.

## Should We Go Through Each Step?

In most cases, yes, you should. There's a clear set of escalating interventions in Matthew 18. What would be gained by skipping steps?

However, in the situation of 1 Corinthians 5, it seems that there was no escalation in the process: Paul sent them straight to the fourth step of ex-communication. Why is that?

One of the most critical aspects of repentance is disclosure. When a believer comes forward with the disclosure of a serious sin such as those listed in verse 11 of 1 Corinthians 5, that voluntary disclosure is evidence that the process of repentance is likely well underway in their heart. The first step or two of Matthew 18 will be sufficient to see their restoration journey through to completion.

On the other hand, if the sin is discovered rather than disclosed, then there has been no time for a process of repentance to begin and mature in the heart of the believer. The sin of this man in Corinth was discovered — and even at that, the discovery did not prompt any turning away from the sin.

Another aspect of repentance is contrition, that sorrow of the soul that is expressed over the sin that has been committed. Indeed, there was no contrition evident in the man's life in Corinth and to make matters worse, there was no contrition on the part of the assembly either.

Further, the testimony of the assembly in Corinth was significantly at risk because of the man's behaviour. Paul points out that his sin was reprehensible even to the immoral, unsaved people of the city. This was immorality at a level that was not even entertained by the world!

So it is, when we are suddenly confronted with major, ongoing sin that is not even tolerated or accepted in

the world, and when there is no evidence of repentance or a desire to change, and perhaps even when we see the people of God in the assembly are endorsing or beginning to endorse such severe sin, an escalating, prolonged process would do more harm than good. The issue must be addressed publicly and immediately, and severely.

The assembly in Corinth needed to promptly distance itself from this blatant sin — both for the preservation of the assembly itself and its testimony before the world.

This is precisely the kind of situation where ex-communication is so necessary. If the assembly is seen to endorse such despicable sin so that the world would question the validity of the gospel, then the assembly must distance itself from the sinning person until a proven change in their way of life is evident to both the assembly and the world around.

On the other hand, if the sin is private, if the circle of awareness is tiny, if it is voluntarily disclosed, and if repentance and contrition are abundantly evident: a massive intervention such as is described in 1 Corinthians 5 would serve no purpose in restoring the believer. The restoration is already well underway.

## What Sins Should Be Disciplined?

Any sin that is impeding a believer's spiritual growth and wellbeing should be addressed per Matthew 18:15. Try to step away from the idea that the only sins we need to address are those listed in 1 Corinthians 5. There's a lot of sin—thankfully, most of them are much less severe than those in that chapter. But all sin should be confronted lovingly and carefully and with a view to restoration. As Galatians 6:1 says,

*Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. (NKJV)*

To answer the question: all sins should be disciplined provided that you see discipline as a process of moving a sinning believer towards restoration.

However, seven sins are identified as those that may result in ex-communication: six are listed in 1 Corinthians 5 plus one more in 1 Timothy 1:20 (blasphemy).

Let me preface my considerations of the sins below by pointing out that any single expression of these sins should begin with Step 1: a Matthew 18:15 confrontation between yourself and the sinning believer.

## 1. Sexual Immorality

Two questions come up around this sin:

1. Where is the line crossed from imprudence into sexual immorality?
2. Is one act of sexual intercourse worthy of ex-communication when all the other sins listed in 1 Corinthians 5 are clearly habitual or even characterological?

The biggest practical challenge I see in this area is the disparities around these two questions. Recall the two situations I described above. In Situation 1, you have a young unmarried couple who, in one heated moment, have sexual intercourse. They aren't caught: they come with grief and remorse and confess to the elders of the assembly with repentant hearts. According to our tradition, they are publicly disciplined and excommunicated from the assembly.

In situation 2, you can have a brother with active involvement in gospel work and decades-long pornography addiction, including sexual conversations with other women online. He has lost his children to the world because of the double life he leads. His wife is an utter emotional wreck after decades of lies, betrayal, and repeatedly dashed hopes for recovery after her catching him red-handed. Yet, because he has never put his penis in another woman's vagina, there is no assembly discipline for him and no justice for her for the decades of lies, betrayal, and trauma she has experienced.

Let me ask you: which of those two scenarios represents the greater degree of sexual immorality? Which of these two scenarios resulted in a tangible sense of restoration to Christ? And which one earns the consequence of public assembly discipline and ex-communication? The problem with the one-act-means-excommunication approach is evident here.

But that leads to another question. If Paul lists fornication or sexual immorality as an excommunicable sin in 1 Corinthians 5, where is the line crossed into an excommunication-worthy act?

### When is Sexual Immorality Worthy of Excommunication?

Any believer engaging in extra-marital or pre-marital sexual activity has acted in a sexually immoral way. The only type of exception to this would be where the sexual activity occurred as an offence towards the believer. For example, a sister who was raped should not be considered guilty of sexual sin. This exception would extend to survivors of childhood sexual abuse, of course.

Any sexual activity within marriage that involves extra-marital persons is sexually immoral (including the shared consumption of pornography).

Any sexual activity within marriage that is not consensual or honouring of the image of God vested in one's spouse is sexually immoral (e.g., marital rape).

From this, you can see that the line is crossed into sexual immorality very quickly and often long before extra-marital sexual intercourse has occurred.

All sexual immorality warrants a confrontation beginning at Step 1: no matter if you are dealing with pornography and masturbation by one person alone or if you are dealing with consensual sexual activity between two people. Start with Matthew 18:15 and proceed through the steps of discipline until either restoration is evident or ex-communication is necessary. If the initial confrontation of step 1 results in clear evidence of contrite repentance and a recommitment to holy living, restoration is complete.

This allows overseers to equally address a pornography addict who must take steps to break his addiction and a young unmarried couple where things became too heated one night and went too far. Or even a young unmarried couple who are becoming too hands-on with each other, though they may not have had sex nor “gone too far.” It also allows you to begin a discipline process in a case where there is a betrayal in marriage but no fornication (e.g., a husband has been developing an emotional affair and gone so far as kissing another woman).

In any of these cases, the goal is restoration to the Lord and holy living. The discipline process is complete when restoration happens (at whatever stage). On the other hand, a person’s unwillingness to repent will eventually result in ex-communication due to their disobedience towards moral boundaries around human sexuality.

## **Should We Excommunicate for One Act of Extra-marital Sexual Intercourse?**

Not necessarily.

1 Corinthians 5 describes an ongoing sexual relationship. It is an exegetical error to note the singular of “sexual immorality” and interpret it as one sexual act requiring ex-communication. All the apostle is saying is that immorality exists in this relationship: the fact that it is happening is the issue, and the singular should not be interpreted as one unique incident of immorality.

If you take a word search tool and trace the word “sexually immoral” through your New Testament, you’ll see a clear pattern of reference to the kind of person who is constantly living a sexually immoral life. You won’t find it ever used about someone who committed one act of sexual intercourse outside of marriage.

Now, this may be raising alarm bells. Am I saying the occasional sexual act before or outside of marriage is OK? Not at all: the Apostle reiterates in chapter 6 that “the body is not for sexual immorality” (v.13) and that we are to “flee sexual immorality.” The New Tes-

tament writers constantly urged the recipients of their epistles to refrain from sexual immorality.

I think we’ve adopted the position that one act is punishable by excommunication in an effort to keep our young people from having premarital sex. It is not wrong to desire this outcome, but if you stop and consider that approach: we are using the threat of punishment as a tool for sanctification. That contradicts the gospel. Further, it implicitly permits other sins that do not cross the line but should be considered sexually immoral. A believer may wallow in an unresolved pornography addiction for years, and the elders have no capacity in which to discipline him because there’s been no sexual intercourse. Yes, a position like this may prevent sex in some cases, but it utterly fails to protect believers from sexual immorality in a far greater number of others.

We can raise the bar on sexual holiness by stepping away from the idea that one act of fornication must result in ex-communication. We take away the ability to begin the discipline process for so many other forms of sexual immorality when we do that. And when we take that away, we deny our assembly members the opportunity for an overseer-engaged process of restoration from this far broader set of sexual struggles that they have.

In the previous article, I asked you what would have to change in your discipline process in order for saints to willingly and readily approach the oversight with sexual struggles to ask for help. This is the key: the sinning believer has to know that the first response or reaction will not be public humiliation. That is reserved for the recalcitrant person who will not respond to the first two discipline steps. The public announcements of Matthew 18:17, 1 Corinthians 5, 1 Timothy 5:20 and the public mention of Hymenaeus and Alexander are all examples of unrepentant people. In the New Testament, you will not find any instance of a repentant, contrite, confessing saint having their sin announced publicly.

An erring saint’s private confession and restoration is a complete, redemptive process. The absence of a public excommunication does not mean that restoration has been diverted: it just means it was not required for this person’s restoration.



So I am not by any means proposing that we become “OK” with any single act of extra-marital sexual intercourse. Instead, I am calling us to a higher standard of holiness and a higher standard of intervention for the purpose of restoration in the lives of God’s people.

But at the same time, going straight to the fourth step of discipline in every case of a single act of sexual intercourse is too general of an approach. If repentance has already occurred, confession has been made, and the individuals are restored to the Lord: what spiritual benefit is there to expose their error to the assembly? All the restoration that needs to happen is already gained — all we do is resort to a punishment that is above and beyond the call of discipline and of no benefit to the believers involved.

## 2. Covetousness

Covetousness is one of the sins listed in 1 Corinthians 5 that I have never known to be disciplined. But again, if we step away from the old punishment model of assembly discipline towards a step-wise, restoration-oriented process as we see in Matthew 18, then it becomes much more helpful to consider how we might wish to hold one another accountable for this sin in our local assemblies.

Turning to lexicons for help, this word covers a range of meanings entered around the idea of someone who is excessively desirous of acquiring more and more. And not necessarily only material things, although that would be the most common example.

Early examples of how this word was used include:

- striving for power
- pressing others for one’s own advantage
- the attempt to take more than what you should have
- striving for material possessions

In 2 Peter 2:3, there are lying preachers who use their position to exploit others financially. In Colossians 3:5, the word is lumped in with sexual sins (think of the idea of taking more than what you should have), and a similar connection is made in Ephesians 5:3.

This would certainly cover the need to discipline, for example, sex offending behaviours that don’t involve sexual intercourse, such as voyeurism (more commonly known as the peeping Tom).

In its lesser forms, covetousness appears as materialism in all of our lives. Since it can occur on a very graduated scale, it may be hard to know when to intervene. But if you see a believer beginning to accumulate material things that are unnecessary or even things they really should not have, then based on Matthew 18:15, it is worth having a conversation with them to see what is going on for them now that they have begun to turn towards this sin.

Extreme forms of covetousness may look like excessive opulence, hoarding or an aggressive grasping after physical things or intangible property to the detriment of others or the believer themselves.

## 3. Idolatry

Idolatry is often linked to covetousness and sexual immorality in our Bibles.

I used to have a hard time relating to this sin because I never found myself tempted to bow down before some physical representation of a perceived deity.

And then I realized my smartphone had become an idol! Whenever I felt anxious, distressed or even uncomfortable, I would pick the device up and start flipping through apps or otherwise trying to numb and distract myself. Anything that I take my needs to, however legitimate those needs are, is something that I am turning to besides God. That is the very definition of idolatry.

It is difficult for me to envision a level of idolatry in North American culture that would warrant ex-communication from a local assembly. However, using the smartphone example, there have been times when my wife has had to say to me, “You’re getting addicted to your phone.” That is her following the instructions of Matthew 18:15. Now, I was able to acknowledge the sin and adjust my behaviour. But had I not, that’s a problem that could get far enough out of hand that it would severely disrupt our family func-

tioning. Would she be justified in seeking two or three witnesses (elders) and setting up an intervention to confront me? Absolutely. Once again, we see the wisdom and flexibility of Scripture to provide for even the very modern challenges of life in the 21st century.

Undoubtedly, there would be actual cases of idolatry in other parts of the world, or possibly within some North American subcultures. However, we must consider the principle in order to find valuable ways to apply this here.

## 4. Railing or Reviling

Railing might be one of the most abused reasons for ex-communication. If you want someone out of your assembly, you just need to get them angry enough to say something derogatory about the elders and, tada, you have a railing charge.

That is most unfortunate.

Railing or reviling is really about calumny: the making of false and defamatory statements about someone in order to damage their reputation (definition from Google). It is meant to act as a means to protect one member of your assembly from being wrongly slandered by another.

This sin is not listed in order to prevent accusations from being made. It is listed to protect a believer from a false allegation that significantly damages their reputation.

For example, about 5% of accusations of sexual assault are false — these accusations are as devastating as the ones accompanying allegations of actual assaults. False accusations often permanently damage a person's reputation in the sight of their family, workmates, and community. Permanent distrust or skepticism about a person's character often results.

If this kind of false accusation is made, the sin is railing, and the person sinning needs to be disciplined. Of course, this particular kind of accusation can be difficult to prove either way; but it is good to remember that 95% of these accusations are accurate and

true. That is why we should initially always accept the testimony of someone who makes an accusation of this sort.

However, a more familiar example may look like an attempt of one believer to systematically destroy the reputation of another believer. Thankfully the Scripture identifies this sin and gives us the license to confront it in order to preserve and protect the innocent.

## 5. Drunkenness

Drunkenness is about intoxication. Any substance disorder (drug or alcohol abuse) warrants the intervention of others in the life of the person struggling with this issue. Again, Matthew 18 should be followed: a thoughtful, escalating intervention designed to motivate the person to repent and be restored.

I believe this word would cover any form of addiction, whether a substance addiction or process addiction (which includes any behavioural addiction such as pornography or food or work addictions).

One of the challenges of helping people struggling with addictions is their remarkable ability to minimize and hide their habits. They may readily assure you that the problem is under control and was a one-time occurrence while, in reality, it is an ongoing issue.

With this in mind, it is wise to take extra time and pay close attention to the person's recovery. It is not unreasonable to request evidence of ongoing sobriety or, at the very least, an openness to being asked how they are doing with their sobriety at any point in the future.

## 6. Extortion

Extortion is an interesting one. The simplest form to understand is that of a swindler: someone who takes what does not belong to them by force or deceit.

I believe this charge should especially be considered in the case of domestic abuse: whether that includes physical and/or emotional abuse of another, perpetuated either by a husband or wife. And directed at a spouse or at children or even elder abuse.

The one cautionary note on this issue is that the oversight would want to be very careful that the discipline of an abusive person did not result in more danger or abuse coming down (typically behind the scenes) on the victims of the abuse. If a wife told you her husband was hitting her and you disciplined him without ensuring she was protected and safe, he may well punish her in a very severe way for exposing his problem. These situations can be very delicate and need to be handled with wisdom and care.

Of course, it also covers a range of illicit business activities: fraud, blackmail, usury, etc.

I would just encourage you to think of this particular sin in a wider context than what happens in the business world or even just with regard to financial matters.

One more concern to note is that when this sin is compounded with sexual immorality, such as in the case of sex offending behaviours, the whole concept of restoration needs to take on a whole new level of requirements. The standard evidence of contrition and repentance is not nearly enough to ensure that this person will be safe around vulnerable populations in the future. This is a unique situation in which professionals familiar with sex offenders who operate in a church context should be consulted to ensure the ongoing safety of all persons attending your assembly. I would gently and respectfully suggest that assembly overseers are not qualified to assess an offender's likeliness of reoffending accurately. This type of assessment can only be provided by a trained, experienced professional.

## 7. Blasphemy

Blasphemy is not listed in 1 Corinthians 5 but is taken from Paul's writings regarding Hymenaeus and Alexander in 1 Timothy 1:19-20:

*...which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck, 20 of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme. (NKJV)*

2 Timothy 2:17 tells us that their wrong teachings had spread like cancer, resulting not only in their spiritual downfall but also in the overthrowing of the faith of others.

It's essential to understand what blasphemy is. This is not just a different theological viewpoint: it is a disparaging or slandering of the character or work of God. These are false teachers whose impact is to overthrow the faith of other believers. They are a destructive force within the local assembly.

If we again turn to Matthew 18, we should understand that if we see early signs of false teaching in another believer's life, we should confront those issues as early as possible, gently correct them, and guide them toward the truth. If the truth is received, then no further action is necessary.

However, there may also be cases where these teachers come upon an assembly in an unexpected manner, as it seems the case was with Hymenaeus and Alexander. In this situation, because of the severity of the wrong doctrine (it was blasphemy) and its impact (overthrowing the faith of others), a direct, rapid decision to excommunicate was necessary to protect God's people.

That concludes the section on sins that the Scriptures consider worthy of ex-communication. In any case, it's helpful to remember that any sin in the believer's life is worthy of confrontation so that we might be building one another up in love. However, when proceeding unchecked in the believer's life and without any signs of repentance, these more severe sins warrant the extreme response of ex-communication from the local assembly.

## The Communication of Discipline

During the process of discipline, communication is of paramount importance. There are several aspects to consider.

### Communication Starts with Membership

This can be a challenging point and is not one I have considered until recently.

If you engage in a discipline process with an individual in the fellowship of your assembly, and that process results in a public meeting where you describe their sin, the overseers will find themselves publicly sharing the intimate details of the erring person's life.

In a country like the USA, where a litigious legal framework exists, this could result in the assembly being sued for defamation, breach of privacy, and the intentional affliction of emotional distress. Now, please note that I am not a lawyer nor an American! I am relying on [other sources](#) for this information and have heard of a couple of situations anecdotally where discipline has resulted in legal action against a local assembly.

The most straightforward path to avoiding this is to obtain and record the informed consent of the believers in the fellowship of your assembly through clearly articulated written agreements. Granted, the assemblies have a history of distaste for written policies, but there is no other way to mitigate the risk of litigation.

Disclaimer: This recommendation is provided for general information purposes only and is not a substitute for legal advice for your particular situation.

## Hosting a Discipline Meeting

When I use the words “discipline meeting,” I am speaking of step 3 or 4 in the process detailed in Matthew 18 as described above.

In describing how to respond to the sinning brother of 1 Corinthians 5, Paul tells the assembly at Corinth what they need to do “when you are gathered together.” This is a clear signal that one of the gatherings of a local assembly is for discipline.

In the past, many assemblies have handled discipline after the Lord's supper: visiting guests and those in the seat of the unlearned are asked to leave the main auditorium for a private announcement for the assembly members. In my opinion, having a discipline meeting as a brief addendum to another meeting does not do enough to acknowledge the severity of the situation.

There's no significant scriptural precedent here, but it does seem that Paul was indicating a special, separate gathering in 1 Corinthians 5:4. And if you have a situation severe enough to warrant informing the entire assembly, it does make sense to call a special gathering of the Lord's people.

Based on what we have looked at in Matthew 18, the first discipline meeting should inform the saints of who the guilty party is and the nature and extent of the ongoing sin. It would likely be helpful to mention what has been done so far to pursue the restoration of this person. But the purpose of this discipline meeting is to invite the assembly to confront the erring person lovingly.

It's worth noting that Paul does not mention the graphic details of the sexual immorality. Just that it was happening and who was involved. Overseers will want to be sensitive to the impact of this disclosure, even on family members or possibly the accused's spouse.

Because public discipline occurs relatively infrequently, sometimes even decades apart, it is wise to teach through these passages and remind the assembly of their responsibilities from time to time.

Again, if it is Step 3 of the process under consideration, you would invite the assembly, as the Lord leads, to confront the wayward individual and urge them towards repentance and restoration. It would be helpful for the individual to attend this meeting and to witness the assembly's agreement with the two or three witnesses that this sin is indeed incredibly serious and needs to be removed from their life and repented of.

It may even be helpful (in a Bible reading sort of format) for other brothers in the assembly to speak of the impact of this sin and their desire to see the person repent and be restored. It would be appropriate for spiritual brothers to speak on behalf of the assembly and lovingly rebuke the person by addressing them directly.

Ideally, the erring person will respond with repentance during the meeting or shortly after that. If there is no evident repentance after a sensible amount of time, then the elders will reconvene the assembly to excommunicate this member per Step 4 of the process.

Again, the sin can be identified, the additional efforts of assembly members to rebuke the sin could be described, and evidence of the ongoing unrepentance in the heart of the person who is being disciplined should be shared. It would also be ideal for the sinning believer to attend this meeting. The Scriptures should be opened and reasonable evidence given for this necessary, final step of restoration. It would be prudent to have one or more brothers offer up a thoughtful, heartfelt prayer for the repentance and restoration of the believer before going home. As a matter of personal opinion, I would suggest that the singing of hymns has no place in this kind of gathering. There is nothing to rejoice over at a discipline meeting.

## **Expectations Around Social Discipline**

It is helpful at both of these gatherings for the elders to define the terms of the social aspect of discipline, namely what their requests are of the assembly regarding Paul's instructions "not to keep company with anyone named a brother" who is guilty of these sins.

It also is helpful to state your expectations of family members: it is not uncommon to suggest that immediate family can continue to interact as usual. There's no license in Scripture for family shunning due to discipline. It gets a little more difficult as to how to guide them, but certainly, any interaction for the purpose of restoration would be welcome. While it is not necessary to be unfriendly or unkind towards someone who has been disciplined, if there is absolutely no change in the social experience of the disciplined person, then there is no motivation towards repentance. The erring person must feel the consequence of their actions in the loss of blessing that comes with being part of a local church family. Attempting to alleviate this pain does a disservice to the Holy Spirit's work of repentance in their heart.

So it will be helpful to encourage those in the assembly who have the gift of shepherding and are spiritual to continue to check in with the person but to ask the remainder of the assembly to refrain from unnecessary social contact. Again, this doesn't mean if you run across the person at the grocery store that you cannot say hello or even give them a word of encouragement to return to the Lord.

Often, many believers leave discipline meetings with many questions unanswered around how to implement and respect the discipline of the assembly. As much as possible, it's helpful to proactively address these uncertainties.

Of course, if the disciplined person is not present, these expectations should be communicated to him/her. Having said that, wherever possible, the accused person should be asked to attend the discipline meetings.

## **Confidentiality and Gossip**

It is also prudent to remind the assembly that the information should be kept confidential. Gossiping (including idle speculation) about discipline often leads to a great deal of disinformation. This widespread gossip makes restoration very difficult if the person feels they will bear a permanent black mark. (Gossip is an idle conversation about others without any good purpose).

## When Communication Should Be Communicated More Broadly

While “tell it not in Gath” may help restrain gossip and unnecessary damage to a person’s reputation, there are times when communication about someone’s sin needs to extend beyond the realm of the oversight and/or assembly members. Here are some examples of when the sin should be communicated beyond the membership of the assembly:

- If there is any possibility that a child is currently in danger (or, in some jurisdictions, any vulnerable person), this must be reported to the appropriate authorities. This is a legal requirement throughout all Canadian and US jurisdictions and may even be broadened to include other factors. Familiarize yourself with local laws.
- If the person has indicated that they may harm themselves or another person, that must be communicated as well. Self-harm possibilities such as suicide may require immediate emergency intervention if a plan is in place and about to be implemented. If it is a more general threat, family members should be advised. It would be prudent to call a suicide hotline to make sure you respond appropriately to what has been disclosed.
- If a threat has been made against another person, that person should be warned, and if the threat seems legitimate and a person’s safety is at stake, the police should be informed as well. If you are in a position of responsibility, you have a duty to warn.
- If the person has committed a criminal offence, this must be reported to the police. While the assembly is the highest spiritual authority on earth, it is not the highest legal authority. 1 Corinthians 6 only restricts believers from pursuing civil matters in a court of law, not criminal matters.

In some cases, it may also be necessary to inform other assemblies of the discipline and/or the threat this individual may represent to others. There are examples from Scripture where specific individuals were publicly named in this way. Paul mentions two in 1 Timothy 1:20:

*Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme (NKJV)*

When there is a likelihood that someone could spread false doctrine and discipline has occurred due to this teaching, it seems prudent and biblical to communicate the discipline to assemblies where this person may have otherwise been accepted to the teaching platform. This is necessary to preserve the integrity of the doctrine from men who previously had access to platforms for the purpose of teaching.

Another Alexander is mentioned in the subsequent letter to Timothy:

*Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm. May the Lord repay him according to his works. You also must beware of him, for he has greatly resisted our words. (2 Timothy 4:14-15, NKJV)*

This also sets a precedent for warning other believers of someone who represents a threat to others and is not (at least currently) rehabilitatable. An intentional and thoughtful adherence to this example in Scripture would prevent alleged sex offenders from simply moving to another assembly to resume their predatory activities. Unfortunately, this is a vital truth to implement in our day.

## Communicating a Change of How Discipline is Practiced

Some oversights have already implemented a revised approach to discipline, such as what I am describing in this article. One pitfall to avoid is neglecting to communicate this change to the assembly.

It takes time for people to adjust to change. The difficulty with making a change like this is that you may have members in your assembly who have witnessed years of the old, harsher approach to discipline. Or you may have family members of those who have

gone through this in your assembly and their loved ones have never come back.

And when they discover that you have not disciplined Person B last month how you disciplined Person A 10 years ago, there is a very real possibility that you'll be accused of favouritism.

Others may accuse you of going soft on sin since the "execution-style" approach to discipline is no longer being used.

To avoid these concerns, it would be wise to teach the saints your revised views on discipline. Preferably long before you need to use them.

As part of this announced change in approach, you may wish to speak to why the change has come about. You may need to personally follow up with those disciplined according to the previous format. They will likely feel their challenging experience has suddenly become unnecessary, which could feel unjust. It will take some thoughtful shepherding to convince them from the word of God and to help them navigate residual emotions from their own past experiences.

## Restoration

I trust that by this point, it is evident that restoration is the primary goal of discipline. Taught correctly and carried out by shepherds, it should be a process that erring saints seek out rather than avoid. When overseers bring both grace and truth to the work of discipline, the fruit should be repentance and restoration.

At the same time, this is often the most spiritually tragic work we do. It is emotional and draining. We often are unsure of exactly how to proceed. And yet, when we step away from the excommunication-only approach, and consider the nuanced application of both Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5, then we have a slower-paced means of grace whereby God can work out His story of redemption in the heart of a wandering saint.

May God give his under-shepherds the wisdom to know how to work this out in the tension between grace and truth.