

# ADMONISHING: A LOST PRACTICE?

BY LAURA LOCK

Admonish. Not a common word or a popular practice in church life at the moment, perhaps for understandable reasons. But how do we respond when church people behave inappropriately, at whatever level? Do we avoid or address misdemeanours?

Admonishing people feels risky, as it's possibly the most challenging thing church leaders have to do, often with little or no training. Yet without it, are we missing a vital component in our leadership?

## WHY ADMONISH?

A simple way of understanding admonishing is to break it down into three areas. It involves advising, warning, and reprimanding, and includes explaining 'dos and don'ts', cautioning and disciplining.

The Bible refers to admonishing as a part of church life in a number of ways. For example, Colossians 1:28, 'He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.' And again in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 (NASB), 'We urge you, brothers and sisters, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.'

In this way the Bible encourages us to see that we can benefit from appropriate admonishment. As Bonhoeffer notes, 'Reproof is unavoidable. God's word demands it when a brother or sister falls into sin.'<sup>1</sup> Alongside this, Adams contends, 'Discipline is God's provision for good order in his Church that creates conditions for the instruction and growth of the members. Discipline has a positive function'.<sup>2</sup>

But admonishing digs deeper than merely correcting misdemeanours. James 5:19-20 (ESV) speaks of a deeper reality, 'My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that

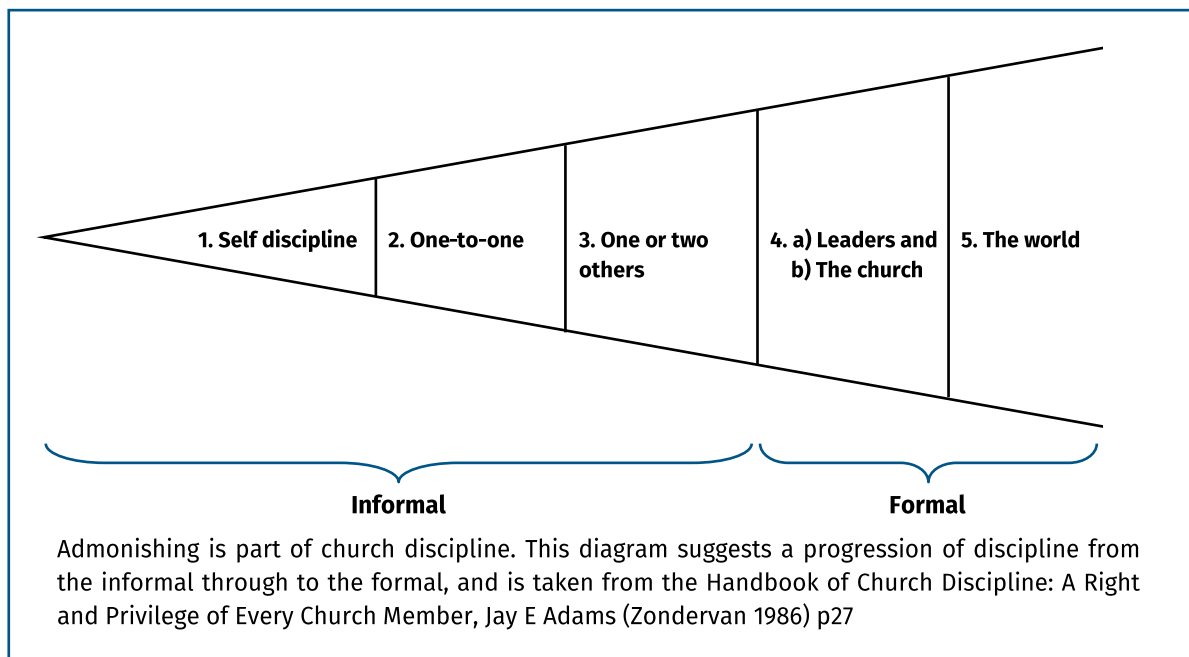
whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.' And so Welch suggests: 'We need one another in our struggle with suffering, sin and temptation. Suffering hurts more, but sin is more serious. Suffering will not last, but sin has consequences that reach into eternity.'<sup>3</sup>

It is far easier to keep the peace, and our desire to be liked by everyone, and the realities of endless things to do (knee deep in sermon preparation anyone?), mean that the tough work of admonishing is often placed on one side. Taking the state of someone's soul seriously requires a fully devoted discipler with a kind heart, wise mind, gentle spirit, and a flexible diary. And above all they will need to be motivated by love, love that doesn't gloss over the harder things that it might be helpful to address.

## WHO ADMONISHES?

Church leaders, elders, or older, mature people of faith usually lead on admonishing,<sup>4</sup> as it needs wise, sensitive handling and skilful interaction to engage people in a conversation that we pray will lead to repentance and growth, not shame. That's the challenge: gentleness is key to ensure the 'power differential' that exists between church leader and others is not experienced as harsh, shaming, or abusive. Unwise admonishment could end in a broken relationship with you, or worse – with Jesus. And in an age where people are rightly sensitised to abusive behaviour, an inappropriate approach could lead to someone being accused of spiritual abuse.

Admonishing is part of church discipline<sup>5</sup> but should not involve public shaming. Leeman states, 'A clear principle from Matthew 18:15-20 is that Jesus means for the process of correcting sin to involve as few people as necessary for producing repentance.'<sup>6</sup> Giles maintains "[Leader/Elders] will be called on to wade into the lives of others with guidance, comfort, nurture as well as confrontation and correction."<sup>7</sup>



### WHEN ADMONISH?

It isn't always easy to discern when to admonish, and generally it is best to do so only when we have consulted with others who can offer a different perspective as we weigh up the appropriate response to more complex situations. Yet leaders do have a 'duty of care' to address the following situations:

1. **When the law has been broken** for example theft, fraud, violence, abuse and so on.
2. **When someone's behaviour puts others at risk** for example child or 'vulnerable adult' abuse, domestic abuse (If confronting won't increase the risk of harm), bullying behaviour on a committee.
3. **When someone is leading others astray** for example ungodly, immoral, or risky behaviour or heretical or erroneous beliefs.

We need wisdom to discern whether we should advise, warn or reprimand depending on the context, circumstances, and frequency of the presenting misdemeanour and any previous misdemeanours. Each represents an escalation in discipline which unavoidably increases relational conflict.

Lane and Tripp observe: 'It's inevitable: you will have conflict if you live with sinners. Relationships are costly, but so is avoiding them. If you avoid them you will

minimise conflict, but that safety has liabilities of its own. If you choose to face the conflict head on it is full of risks and the potential for great hurt, but it can also be redemptive. Either way, there are consequences for your decision.'<sup>8</sup>

Here are some suggested examples of when to advise, warn or reprimand, but please note opinions will vary depending on personal style.

- a. **Advise** the music leader who sings a song that is theologically unsound.
- b. **Advise** the congregant who publicly shares the name of someone who is sick without their prior permission.
- c. **Warn** the warden who verbally attacks someone in a meeting on the first and possibly second occasion – then reprimand them on any third offence, offering help for problematic anger.
- d. **Warn** the person caught stealing a handbag from the back of the church that they must return the handbag immediately or the police will be called.
- e. **Reprimand** the treasurer who is found to have stolen church funds on several occasions by applying disciplinary policy action and (most likely) immediate dismissal.

Advise	Warn	Reprimand'
'Please turn off your mobile'	'If you won't mute your mobile I'll have to ask you to leave'	'I need to ask you to take that call outside'

Reference: Oxford Dictionary (online)

## WHEN SHOULD WE NOT ADMONISH?

It's not the right time to admonish when someone has made a mistake. Welch observes, 'When people make mistakes the last thing they need is discipline. It's time for encouragement and confidence. The job at this point is to restore self-confidence.'<sup>9</sup>

## WHERE SHOULD WE ADMONISH: IN PUBLIC OR IN PRIVATE?

Matthew 18:15-17, 'If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church.'

When a misdemeanour happens in private, as a general rule address it in private. When a misdemeanour happens in public, but it's not harmful to others (for example, someone turns up drunk), gently let both the offender and onlookers know you will address it in private. Avoid shaming the offender while reassuring onlookers you will address behaviour that needs to change.

If the misdemeanour occurs in public and harms others or threatens disunity (for example, shouting, slandering, accusing, threatening, racially discriminating and so on), address the offence briefly in public and let both the offender and onlookers know you will address it more fully in private. This briefly addresses the needs of the aggrieved as well as the individual causing the grievance. Again, do all you can to avoid shaming the offender while validating the needs of the aggrieved who may need additional support and guidance on how best to respond in private.



I can't allow you to make angry accusations about Kevin, Gillian. Let's discuss this in private.

All this requires swift, cool-headed thinking, especially when meetings deteriorate into 'the OK Corral' and attacks are aimed at you. It is wise to develop 'stock response phrases' in advance that pre-empt various challenging scenarios and help you keep cool in the heat of the moment. For example:



Bob, I value your views, but all views must be expressed in ways that can be heard as respectful. Please can we talk about this sometime one-to-one?

## WHY, WHEN WHERE AND HOW TO ADMONISH

Admonishing others is enormously challenging as there are significant relational risks. We will need wisdom, humility, gentleness, and patience, as these verses reflect.

- **Colossians 3:12,16** '... clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience... Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.'
- **Galatians 6:1** 'Brothers and sisters, if anyone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently.'
- **1 Thessalonians 5:14-15** 'We urge you brothers and sisters, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.' (NASB)

Addressing someone's sin is risky. First and foremost, wherever possible, establish a positive relationship long before you admonish anyone, and encourage them frequently. Admonishing is particularly hazardous if your relationship with the person is cool, distant or you are perceived as overbearing. It's wise to get to know your people well and ensure they experience you as wholeheartedly 'for' them (see Ephesians 4:29). That's challenging, even in small churches.

Relational risk can be minimised through love and wisdom by addressing three essential considerations<sup>10</sup>, and following key principles<sup>11</sup> and practical steps<sup>12</sup> as follows.

## THREE ESSENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. **The person** Consider their weaknesses as well as their sins before you act, aiming for what will build them up.
2. **The problem** Be curious about what they may be struggling with and what they need most.
3. **The process** Focus on discerning the best way to say what needs to be said, and the right time. It's easy to say the right thing but in the wrong way and at the wrong time.



## PRINCIPLES

ADMONISHING PRINCIPLES	STEPS
1. Establish positive relationships before you admonish	<b>Spend time with people</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wherever possible get to know them, encourage them, and establish trust long before you admonish anyone.</li> <li>Openly affirm your love for them.</li> </ul>
2. Admit any sin you may have brought to the situation	<b>Examine yourself</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Model humility and repentance and our constant need for God's forgiveness and grace.</li> <li>Openly admit where you have not loved well, identifying any sins of commission or omission.</li> <li>This will encourage a humble response and help avoid shame in the offender.</li> </ul>
3. Demonstrate love for the sinner	<b>Acknowledge the good and the hard circumstances first, before the bad</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be curious. As a general rule, discern what is hard in their life before addressing their sin.</li> <li>Demonstrate compassion and mercy in what and how you communicate.</li> </ul>
4. Name the specific problem behaviour while avoiding shaming the sinner	<b>Tackle one sin at a time</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Avoid tackling several misdemeanours at once by choosing the order of priority related to harm to others and themselves.</li> <li>Work hard to bring them to repentance while avoiding them feeling shamed.</li> <li>Stress there is no condemnation for confessed sin.</li> </ul>
5. Stick to just the facts	<b>Say what you have actually seen</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hold up a mirror so others can see themselves more than they see you.</li> <li>Avoid interpretations and usually stay away from how their actions may have hurt or disappointed you – that can wait for later when emotions are less volatile.</li> </ul>
6. Suggest desirable behaviour	<b>Specify what you need them to do differently and why that's helpful</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gently ask them to consider alternative behaviour out of love for God and others.</li> <li>If they don't respond, set gentle, firm boundaries, explaining consequences of non-compliance.</li> </ul>
7. Offer support	<b>Help fellow sinners</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offer help because sin is our most dangerous problem and we all have besetting sins. This will communicate love, commitment, and hope.</li> <li>Remind them the Spirit, the Word and the community are God's primary means of overcoming sin.</li> </ul>
8. Seek mutually acceptable help if you hit problems	<b>Pursue mediation if you can't resolve conflict</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If things become problematic, suggest that together you choose someone you believe will understand both sides of the conflict.</li> </ul>



Following these steps is particularly challenging if issues surface in public with little time to think about how to respond, so as already mentioned, it's wise to develop 'stock phrases' that you can repeat in the heat of unforeseen circumstances. Try hard to defer addressing the issue until you've had adequate thinking time.



I recognise you're under pressure and I care about how tough it is, but can I gently ask you to reflect on how you worded that email?



Yesterday I noticed everyone went silent after you spoke, like they were afraid to speak. You seemed angry. Could we talk about that?

To reduce the chances of them getting hurt, defensive or 'closing down', one principle that has proved useful is to give others feedback about their behaviour when they are behaving differently i.e., to 'strike while the iron is cold'.<sup>13</sup> The ideal time to discuss sensitive issues is when people aren't under pressure or emotionally 'triggered'. Choose your moment wisely.

## ADDRESSING MISDEMEANOURS DURING RELATIONAL CONFLICT

Situations involving interpersonal conflict are particularly challenging, especially if misdemeanours such as verbal attacks or accusations happen in public meetings. When this happens, endeavour to act in the 'opposite spirit' to the offender. For example, if they are behaving in rude, opinionated, accusative, demanding ways, behave in a respectful, humble, non-accusative, undemanding way, wherever possible.

'A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.'

Proverbs 15:1

Powlison suggests two key themes that lie at the heart of [ungodly] conflict are 'grasping demand and self-exaltation'.<sup>14</sup> In other words: 'My kingdom come. My will be done.' It's common for people to want to get their way and it takes sensitivity and skill to help them sacrifice for the greater good.

Work hard to demonstrate humility and relinquishing control. It's important for leaders to model desirable behaviour and forgiveness. That said, forgiveness does not mean keeping peace at all costs by overlooking sin. Lane and Tripp exhort us to take sin seriously by pursuing wayward people<sup>15</sup> to bring them to repentance and spiritual maturity. We see this in the way that Jesus did not condemn the woman caught in adultery, but instructed her to stop sinning (John 8:11).

**Admonishing involves wise judgement...**

**... and skilled communication.**



## LAST WORDS

To conclude: church leaders cannot avoid admonishing if they are to love their flock well. Admonishing involves advising, warning, and reprimanding. If you do all you can to know, love, encourage, support, advise, warn, reprimand, and forgive your flock with wise judgement and skilful communication you can rest content you have done all you can to enable them to become fully devoted followers of Christ.

## EXAMPLE OF HOW TO ADMONISH



I love you Jack and I value your views, even when we disagree. Please forgive me for being insensitive yesterday. I struggle when you shout at me – and I’m guilty of shouting at times too. Please share your views gently as shouting increases conflict. Your views are valid and important, how can I help you share them more gently?



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Reflect on what went well or otherwise when you have been admonished, and why that was.
2. Reflect on whether you love people in your flock enough to address their sin, rather than avoiding conflict.
3. Reflect on how you last responded to someone’s sin or misdemeanour. What went well and what didn’t go well? Did you lead them to repentance, not shame? How could you improve?
4. Have you spent adequate time developing supportive relationships with your staff, volunteers, and congregation members so they know you love them?
5. What ‘stock phrases’ have you prepared ready to use in the heat of the moment?
6. Who can you go to if conflict is unresolvable?

**Note about the author:** Laura Lock is co-lead of Enabled Leaders, a ministry aiming to enable Christian Ministers ([www.enabledleaders.com](http://www.enabledleaders.com)), and she co-lectures on leadership at Spurgeon’s Theological College. She was a leader at Streatham Baptist Church and disciples people both one-to-one and in groups, applying her training in Biblical Counselling (see [www.biblicalcounselling.org.uk](http://www.biblicalcounselling.org.uk)). She has 30+ years experience of professional leadership as a mental health Occupational Therapist, including NHS senior management, an award-winning national special interest group, plus specialist advisory input to NHS England, Royal College of Psychiatrists Quality, Care Quality Commission.

## ENDNOTES

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3. Journal of Biblical Counselling (29:1, 2015), Edward T. Welch, p35.
4. Church Discipline, Jonathan Leeman (Crossway, 2021) pp69-70.
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7. Leadership Training: Shepherding Leaders to Shepherd the Flock, Tony B. Giles (Journal of Biblical Counselling, 2006) p54.
8. Relationships: A Mess Worth Making, Timothy S Lane and Paul David Tripp (New Growth Press, 2008) p76.
9. The Inspirational Leader: Inspire Your Team to Believe the Impossible, Gifford Thomas, (Leadership First, 2019), quoting Jack Welch.
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15. Relationships: A Mess Worth Making, Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp (New Growth Press, 2008) p99.