

Precepts and Principles of Christian Community; Restoration, Reconciliation and Training in Righteousness

- The Manual of Church Discipline -

God, in His infinite wisdom and understanding of the human heart, has given the Body of Christ a way to respond to sin in the lives of believers and in His church. This way is also the principal means by which He maintains the unity, power, purity and integrity of His church and historically has been considered by believers as one of the three marks of the true Church. It is referred to as church discipline. John Calvin, writing in his *Institutes* says "Those who think that the church can stand for long without this bond of discipline are mistaken; unless by chance we can afford to omit that support which the Lord foresaw would be necessary for us. "

Church discipline is a broad topic. From the widest perspective it can be thought of as the "How" of living together in community; specifically, a community of believers known as Christ's Church. From a more narrow perspective it is the aspect of living together in regard to the correct response to wrong behaviors and/or wrong thinking. Wrong behavior or thinking is sin and sin cannot be ignored in the Body of Christ. How we address this sin is the "discipline" of which we speak. Discipline in this sense is not only corrective, which is but a small part, but much more encompassing, consisting of training that refines, molds or perfects. This type of discipline places us in partnership with the Holy Spirit in the process of sanctification and "training in righteousness" in the lives of those with whom the Lord has placed us in community. It is the principle of "iron sharpening iron". This discipline is a mutual responsibility we have toward each other. It is not presented as an option in the Bible.

The elders and pastors of Fellowship church desire that our local body be a community of believers who live together in a way that honors God, encourages and edifies one another and is a strong testimony to the world of the power, grace and truth of the Lord Jesus. We have tried to glean from scripture and compile here the principles and precepts of Christian community that specifically deal with the handling of sin and offense between brothers and sisters in Christ and in the local church. This manual is divided into the following sections:

- What is church discipline?
- What is the purpose of church discipline?
- When is church discipline indicated or prescribed in the Bible?
- Who is subject to church discipline?
- Who initiates and administers church discipline?
- How is church discipline to be administered?

Although the Bible gives clear principles to guide the church in its corrective ministries it does not specifically address all situations or circumstances in which corrective action might be required or taken by the church. We must thoughtfully and prayerfully apply, in love, general biblical principles dealing with sin and the purity of the Church. When a believer sins, their sin not only affects them but it also affects those in the Body of Christ, especially the local church to which they are connected. This effect can be called an offense or transgression. These transgressions or offenses can be very personal as in an offense being committed against an individual or very general as in a member committing a crime that brings reproach on the church solely by his connection to it.

The purpose of this manual is to provide our body with a tool to help us learn to think and respond biblically to sin and offense in our body (which is bound to come) in a way that restores, strengthens, encourages and matures us all.

Tit 2:11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, ¹³ waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. ¹⁵ **Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority.**

What follows is one way in which we, the elders and pastors of Fellowship church, "declare these things" and "exhort" our body to walk in them.

The Bible clearly teaches that God expects the Church to discipline itself.

1Co 6:1 When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? 2 Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? 3 Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! 4 So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? 5 I say this to your shame. **Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers,** 6 but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? 7 To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? 8 But you yourselves wrong and defraud--even your own brothers!

Jam 5:19 My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 20 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.

1. What is church discipline?

Definition:

"The church (Christ's Church) involving itself in people's lives to bring them to maturity by teaching and holding them accountable to God's Word." (Peacemaker Ministries)

Typically when people think of church discipline they are thinking about corrective discipline and that certainly is a part of church discipline. The other, equally important, part is formative discipline.

- Formative discipline encompasses the teaching and fellowship ministries of the church that help believers grow into maturity. It includes preaching, Bible classes, personal study and prayer, fellowship, small groups, and all of the other day-to-day activities of the church that enable believers to *grow in the knowledge of God and inspire them to follow His ways* (see 2 Tim. 4:2; Heb. 10:24-25; Jas. 5:16).
- Corrective discipline is prescribed only when a believer strays from God and needs help getting back on track. As Paul explained it to the Galatians, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (Gal. 6:1, NIV). Jesus Himself lays out the general framework for one form of corrective discipline in Matthew 18:12-20.

Church discipline then is both formative and corrective.

Sometimes these categories can overlap. And while both are important the remaining part of this manual deals primarily with the corrective aspect of church discipline. It can be truly said that the better we are at formative church discipline the less we will have to practice corrective church discipline.

2. What is the purpose of church discipline?

- **To glorify God;** by obedience to his instructions. (The Great Commission) 1 Peter 4:11, 1 Corinthians 10:31
- **To uphold and foster that which leads to life;** Hebrews 12: 10&11
- **To maintain the purity of the church;** 1 Corinthians 5:6-13, Tit 2:11
- **To vindicate the integrity and honor of Christ;** by exhibiting faithfulness to His principles. Matthew 18:15-18; Romans 16:17; I Corinthians 5:6-8; II Thessalonians 3.6-15; Titus 1:13, 2:15, 3:10
- **To restore offenders;** Matthew 18:15, 1 Corinthians 5:5, Galatians 6:1. Galatians 6:1 tells us: "if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, each one looking to yourself lest you too be tempted.
- **To silence false teachers and their influence in the church** (Tit. 1:10-11).
- **To win a soul to Christ, if the sinning person is only a professing Christian** (2 Tim. 2:24-26).
- **To deter others from sin;** 1 Timothy 5:20 says "those who continue in sin rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest may also be fearful of sinning."
- **To prevent giving cause for God to set Himself against a local church for not judging ourselves;** Revelation 2:14-25 tells us how sin within the local fellowship in Pergamum and Thyatira resulted in God disciplining them directly.

We affirm the understanding and purpose of church discipline as stated in the Westminster Confession, written in 1646:

“Church censures are necessary, for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offences, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the Gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the Church, if they should suffer His covenant and the seals thereof to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders (Mat. 7:6; 1Co. 5:1-13; 1Co. 11:27-34 with Jude 1:23; 1Ti. 1:20; 1Ti. 5:20).”

In light of the purposes of church discipline, members need to understand that if they are in the midst of a church discipline process, withdrawing their membership does not stop the process.

3. When is corrective church discipline indicated or prescribed in the Bible?

Restorative and/or disciplinary intervention on the part of the Church into the life of another is prescribed by the Bible when the following three criteria are met:

When the person . . .

- **Professes** to be a believer in Jesus Christ
 - “If **your brother** . . .” (Matt. 18:15)
 - “Anyone who calls himself **a brother** but is. . .” (1 Cor. 5:11)
 - “**Every brother** who is . . .” (2 Thess. 3:6)
 - “Do not regard as an enemy . . . but as **a brother** . . .” (2 Thess 3:15), and
- **Participates** in one or more aspects of the community life of our church
 - This includes, but is not limited to, such aspects of attending our church’s worship services, participating in our classes, ministries or small groups, or serving in any of our ministries or outreach activities.
 - “Sexual immorality **among you** . . . put out of **your fellowship** . . .” (1 Cor. 5:1 & 2 NIV)
 - “Are you not to judge those **inside**?” (1 Cor. 5:12), and
- **Persists** in behaviors or attitudes that are, in the judgment of our church leaders, prohibited in the Scriptures
 - “If he **does not listen** . . .” (Matt. 18:16 & 17)
 - “but **is** sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler.” (1 Cor. 5:11)
 - “if someone is **caught in a sin**, you who are spiritual . . .” (Gal 6:1 NIV)
 - “every brother who is idle and **does not live** according to the teaching you received from us . . . **does not obey** our instruction in this letter . . .” (2 Thess 3:6, 14 NIV)
 - “Those who **persist in sin** . . .” (1 Tim. 5:20)
 - “Warn a divisive person . . . **after that** . . .” (Titus 3:10 NIV)

4. Who is subject to corrective church discipline?

1Ti 5:20-21 *As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.*

2Ti 4:2 *preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.*

All without partiality, this includes:

- Members, pastors, elders.
- Believers who are participating in one or more aspects of the community life of our church.
- *Unbelievers who are attending.
 - Most aspects of church discipline would not apply to unbelievers. The only aspect that might apply would be in the case of someone whose behavior was disruptive and they would be asked to leave or not attend. This technically would not even be “church discipline”.

5. Who initiates & administers *corrective* church discipline?

Spiritually sound believers. Not necessarily elders, pastors or other leaders.

*Gal 6:1 Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, **you who are spiritual** should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.*

All believers have the responsibility to “reprove, rebuke and exhort” our brothers and sisters in Christ. Ultimately, in the context of our local church and its By-Laws, the elders are responsible for the faithful administration of church discipline. This does not necessarily mean that they are personally involved in each situation but rather they shepherd the body: by teaching the principles and precepts of biblical church discipline, encouraging and guiding the Body in its practice and modeling it where necessary. In certain situations it is the responsibility of the elders directly to administer discipline and they may choose to be involved in any situation they believe affects the health of the body. This is one of the primary duties of an elder as taught in Scripture:

*1Pe 5:1 So I exhort the elders among you.... 2 **shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you;***

*Tit 1:9 He (elder) must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, **so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.***

*1Th 5:12-13 We ask you, brothers, to respect those **who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you**, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.*

*Heb 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, **for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.** Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*

In addition to the scriptural directives for the duties of an elder we, as a local fellowship of believers, have incorporated this understanding and submission to it as part of the By-Laws of Fellowship Church and a condition of membership. Everyone that desires membership in our body endorses and agrees to submit to the spiritual authority of the elders, giving them permission to speak into their lives or situations they are involved in as they deem necessary, as spiritual overseers of the flock.

6. The “How” of corrective church discipline:

Gal 6:1 Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.

2Ti 3:16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,

2Ti 4:2 preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

Tit 2:11-15 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority.

2Ti 2:24-26 And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

An appropriate or correct response to any offense is dependent on the type and severity of that offense. In order to help navigate these differences the Bible breaks down these offenses into different groups. We have put these groups into four categories. In each of these categories, we have outlined what we would consider biblical responses or principles that address how to deal with sin and offenses in our church. These categories sometimes overlap and are not intended to be rigid containers that each offense or situation will fit neatly into, but rather a way to help us organize our understanding and give us biblical ways to begin to address different situations and/or offenses. The important thing is that sin is addressed and not ignored and addressed in a Godly and loving way with the motives of restoration, reconciliation, and edification.

The four categories of offense/transgression:

- **Minor**
- **Private and/or Personal**
- **Public**
- **Intolerable**

Minor:

Minor transgressions are offenses that result from imperfections in character, wrong attitudes and personal faults. Some examples would be: rudeness, pettiness, self-seeking, impatience, grumbling, boasting, complaining, being overbearing, dominating conversations, irritability, negativity, worrying, timidity and insensitivity. While this is not a comprehensive list it illustrates behaviors that although minor if experienced occasionally, are still sinful and contrary to the call to be thankful, humble, joyful, patient, kind, forbearing, thinking of others first, slow to anger, content and other characteristics of the Spirit filled life and therefore are rightly to be considered as offenses.

These kinds of offenses and faults are best dealt with by employing forbearance and gracious oversight. Christians are encouraged to cover a transgression and overlook offenses of a minor nature (see Appendix B). If the offense happens consistently enough the next step beyond forbearance would be a private meeting of admonition and gentle rebuke. If this step is thought to be necessary we are to be mindful of Jesus' instruction to remove the "log" from our own eye first. If the behavior or fault begins to become disruptive or damaging to the church then actions beyond a private, gentle rebuke would be considered. However, the private gentle rebuke is the starting point.

If the path of forbearance is chosen, the transgression must be forgiven. It can never be brought up as ammunition against the person. This is the only class of offenses where forbearance is seen as a duty. For other more serious offenses, forbearance would be a sin. Sometimes the line between forbearance and discipline isn't clear. If you come to decide that forbearance should be the course then Romans 15:1-2 should be the guiding principle: "*We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up*". Not just "strong" to put-up-with but "strong" to give aid. Sometimes this might mean "speaking the truth in love" about their shortcoming and a method for overcoming. It should not be interpreted as putting up with sin.

Pro 19:11 Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.

1Pe 4:8 Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.

1Cor 13:4-8 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

Proverbs 10:12 Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.

Romans 15:1-2 we who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.

Philippians 4:5 Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.

Personal and/or Private:

The sins or offenses of this category may be small or serious. Personal offenses are offenses between two Christians. They may be private in that the offense is between two people and no one else is aware of it. Personal offenses could be defined as “any sinful behavior by one believer that causes harm to another”. Some examples might be: verbal abuse or assault, being lied to, the breaking of a verbal agreement, theft or damage to your property, insults, slander, breach of personal trust or contract, physical or sexual abuse, adultery, physical assault, theft, vandalism, etc.

If the offended considers the offense or behavior serious enough and senses the behavior needs to be addressed then his recourse (and duty) is to go to the person privately. Depending on the nature of the sin, the appropriate action might differ. It might consist of a rebuke, a confrontation or in the case of personal property even satisfaction through restitution. Again, in most cases, this should be done privately (Proverbs 25:9, Matthew 18:15). An exception to this might be an offense committed by a man against a woman or vice-versa. Another exception might be where there is a perceived threat of violence. In these cases it would be appropriate for the woman to bring her husband into the conversation or a husband his wife if married and if not then possibly a friend, pastor or elder depending on the seriousness of the offense. If there is uncertainty as to whether to address an issue, talking to an elder or pastor, in strict confidence, would be appropriate.

If the individual listens to you and confesses and repents, you have “won your brother”. If they refuse to listen and will not admit their sin the offended person should closely follow Matthew 18:15-17:

- If the offender remains unrepentant, the offended person must be cautious before taking additional measures. If the offense is unverifiable and not significant enough to bring before the whole church, it should not be pursued further. If it is unverifiable, yet serious, wisdom and Godly counsel should be sought as to the proper steps to take. It is important to address sin and it is also important to avoid gossip, rumors and the possibility of damaging the reputation of someone that given another chance, might repent.
- If the offense is significant, a meeting should be arranged (as in 1 Corinthians 6:1-8), during which the offended person can present his case to the offender in the presence of one or two other members (Matthew 18:16). These should either be witnesses to the offense, or mature, discerning members, who are able to evaluate evidence and testimony, question both parties effectively, determine guilt or responsibility, and offer appropriate biblical counsel.
- If the offender remains unrepentant even after his guilt has been proven before witnesses, the matter should be brought to the church leadership to decide on the next course of action and the time frame for it. Depending on the seriousness of the offense the offender might be asked: to step back from any ministry or leadership roles in the church, to abstain from partaking in the Lord’s Supper, not to attend certain functions or any church functions until they are ready to repent.
- Before the final step, expulsion from membership, the offender will be offered a final opportunity to repent and be restored. Repentance would begin with a confession before the appropriate parties (see Appendix A). If he remains unrepentant he will be considered an unbeliever and expelled from membership (Matthew 18:17). At the discretion of the elders and based on the nature and severity of the sin, the membership may be notified of the removal from membership and possibly requested to break off all fellowship with the offender.
- Even if the offender repents at some point prior to expulsion from membership, restitution and/or other remedial actions may be necessary, as determined by the elders (i.e. mandated accountability, counseling, removal from church office, etc.).
- As stated previously, members need to understand that if they are in the midst of a church discipline process, withdrawing their membership does not stop the process.

In a situation where the parties are not members of the same church the offended or injured party should still follow the instructions of Matt. 18. If the offender refuses to repent and the next step would be telling it to the church, if the offended party considers the offense grievous enough, the offended could approach the leadership of the offending party’s church, with the “one or two witnesses” and see if that church would be willing to take up the matter. The offended party should consider requesting our church leadership to help or go with them at this point. If the other church would not be willing to take up the matter then the offended party has done what they could do and would need to leave the matter in God’s hands for any further action.

1 Cor 6:7 To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?

Public:

Public offenses are ones which harm all the members of the Body. They undermine the unity, purity and reputation of the church. Offenses in this category could include false teaching, sexual immorality, drunkenness, covetousness, extortion, theft, fits of rage, fighting, divisiveness, gossip, slander, profane language, willful failure to provide, wrongful divorce or remarriage, breach of contract, etc.

Public offenses can be especially difficult, at times, for the church to deal with. Whereas the biblical principles for addressing personal offenses are clearly outlined in Matthew 18, the instructions regarding the response to public offenses vary and each situation must be considered carefully and prayerfully. Generally speaking, the more serious offenses in this category will usually require church leadership to take action at some point although those brothers and sisters in relationship with the offender should see it as their responsibility to offer the initial admonishment and help to restore a repentant offender.

The following is a list of biblical responses and measures that address public offenses. Some are general principles; others would be applied in varying degrees depending on the situation and whether the person is a member.

- Watch out for those who begin to commit these types of sin (Rom 6:17), admonish and warn them. Call them to repentance and reestablish them in the truth, when possible (Gal 6:1; James 5:19-20). This is an exhortation for all believers. Elders have additional responsibility to take note and watch closely (Acts 20:28-31; Heb 12:14-16).
- Correct through teaching (2 Tim 2:24-26, 3:16-4:2; Titus 1:9). Public offenses may be committed because of ignorance, lack of understanding and immaturity. This may be the only measure required in less severe cases. This is also part of *formative* church discipline.
- Plead with the offender(s) (1 Corinthians 1:10-11; Philippians 4:2-3). Paul pleaded with the Corinthian church as a group, and with Euodia and Syntyche as individual Christians in Philippi, imploring them to stop being divisive or contentious. In both situations, his pleas, which were in the form of open letters to the churches, also served as gentle public rebukes.
- Warn them of consequences (1 Thessalonians 5:14; Titus 3:10-11). Unruly or disobedient Christians who have not responded to gentle or subtle disciplinary measures are exposing themselves to public rebuke, social avoidance, or even expulsion from the church. Warn them of these embarrassing and painful consequences. Warn them most seriously of the day when they will stand before the Lord Jesus to be judged according to their deeds (2 Cor 5:9-11).
- Publicly rebuke (i.e., stern, sharp reprimand) them (Matthew 16:22-23; Galatians 2:11-14; 1 Timothy 5:20; Titus 1:13; 2:15). The prospect of being publicly rebuked should be a powerful deterrent to sinful behavior, both for the one rebuked, and for others who witness the rebuke. Public rebuke also serves the purpose of public teaching by identifying and exposing the nature of error (Ephesians 5:8-13).
- Silence them (Titus 1:10-11). Paul insisted that false teachers and divisive people “must be silenced,” and his implication was that the *leaders* of the church should make every effort to silence them. This could be accomplished through private warning, public rebuke and exposure of error, administrative removal from a teaching role, etc.
- Shame them through social avoidance (2 Thessalonians 3:6,14-15). Demonstrate to them that their behavior is not acceptable among the church by excluding them from all fellowship *without* expelling them from membership. (Note: This type of brotherly exclusion is rare in the New Testament. It is most likely found only in 2 Thessalonians chapter 3, where the offense was idleness and unruliness due to misguided views about the nearness of the second coming of Christ. It is possibly seen in 2 Corinthians 2:5-8 as well, but the reasons for exclusion in that case are unknown. The reference in Romans 16:17 is almost certainly to outsiders, not members of the church.)

These various measures are all intended to correct and restore and to maintain peace and purity. They are to be applied while there is still hope for repentance. None of them are as severe as expulsion from membership, which is the subject of the next section.

Intolerable (Insufferable Wickedness)

Intolerable offenses refer to situations where there is only one proper course of action—expulsion from membership. There are three types of offenders whose behavior should be considered insufferable, and who must be expelled:

- Unrepentant personal/public offenders—those who have refused to acknowledge their sin and repent, even after being exhorted to repent and rebuked by the church. (Matthew 18:17).
- Gross offenders—those who commit even a single sin that is so abhorrent, shameful, or notorious that the reputation of Christ and the church is imperiled if they are not immediately expelled. (Romans 2:21-24; 1 Corinthians 5:1,5,13)
- Offenders who are known by their wickedness—professing Christians who are known publicly for such sins as heresy, apostasy, divisiveness, sexual immorality, drunkenness, covetousness, etc. Their sinful lifestyle makes them indistinguishable from unbelievers. In others words, they are so characterized by false beliefs, false teaching, destructive motives, worldly affections, or immoral living that they cannot, by definition, be considered Christians (1 Corinthians 5:11-13; 6:9-10; Galatians 5:19-21; Titus 1:16; 1 John 1:5-6; 2:3-4; 3:9-10; 2 John 9-11).

In these situations, all that is necessary before expulsion is the establishment of the facts.

We must notice that in 1 Corinthians chapter 5, Paul did not instruct the church to first warn the incestuous man or seek his repentance. No command was given to rebuke him, publicly or privately, before casting him out. With the man's gross immorality well-known to all, Paul told them to immediately expel him from the church (1 Corinthians 5:5, 13). In verse 11 of the same chapter, Paul lists other types of offenders who must be treated in the same way (Also see 1 Timothy 1:20 and Titus 3:10-11). Even if sorrow is expressed by the offender upon exposure of his sin, expulsion is still necessary at this point in order to bring the person to true, full repentance and maintain the reputation of Christ and the church.

Final Thoughts

There is interplay of opposing elements in the different biblical principles involved in church discipline. On the one hand there is the gentleness of Galatians 6:1, on the other, the severity of Titus 1:13. While we may never be judgmental in our attitudes (Matthew 7:1), we must nevertheless judge among ourselves (1 Corinthians 5:12). Just as we are called to love in a manner that is willing to overlook certain sins (1 Peter 4:8) we must also "exhort one another daily" so that none will be "hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" (Hebrews 3:13). The tension is seen most clearly in that we are to love our brother as Christ loved us (John 13:34-35), yet remain willing to consider him an unbeliever and cast him away if he continues in sin (Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 5:11).

We might be tempted to use the word "balance" in describing our desire to manage this tension. But as it is all-too-commonly understood, "balance" means compromise—easing away from convictions and obligations in order not to appear "unbalanced" or overly zealous. The problem with this understanding is that Scripture never tells Christians to be "balanced" people in this way. On the contrary, we are told to be zealous and fervent, *both* in our love for one another (Colossians 3:14; 1 Peter 4:8), *and* in our pursuit of holiness and purity (Titus 2:14; Hebrews 12:14-17).

What this means for the church in the area of discipline is that we must never rely upon human understanding, which is prone to setting itself against the Word of God. It means we must trust, study, and obey the Scriptures, even when the perceived tension between biblical obligations seems unbearable. We must hold *both* goals of church discipline in the highest regard, always allowing the Word of God to determine our course of action.

Unless noted otherwise, all scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) of the bible.

*We are thankful for the work of Rev. Eleazer Savage who published a *Manual of Church Discipline* in 1845. The idea of approaching offenses based on the five categories listed above has been drawn from his work.

*Some sections from above have been adapted from the discipline statement of Christ Fellowship of Kansas City.

APPENDIX – A

Repentance

As we are learning about church discipline one of the words we see repeatedly is repent or repentance. Understanding what repentance is, and is not, will be important in how we respond to offenders. Now, while it is true that only God knows the heart He also has told us that there are ways we can get an indication of where someone's heart might be. As Mat 12:34b states: "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."

What repentance is not.

The bible speaks of two types of repentance. One type is self-centered and superficial.

Webster defines it this way;

"In theology, the pain, regret or affliction which a person feels on account of his past conduct, because it exposes him to punishment. This sorrow proceeding merely from the fear of punishment is called legal repentance, as being excited by the terrors of legal penalties, and it may exist without an amendment of life."

This type of repentance is also called *attrition*, and is defined as;

"Grief for sin arising from fear of punishment; the lowest degree of repentance."

Repentance of this type is not repentance at all but rather sorrow or grief, or as Paul says in 2 Cor 7:11 "worldly sorrow". This is a self-focused sorrow that is based in fear. Fear of punishment or of losing something. Maybe it is a fear of losing acceptance or our reputation or just being exposed. It is not sorrow or repentance that produces "fruit that is consistent with repentance!" (Mat 3:8). See 1 Sam 15:10-35 for an example of attrition as opposed to repentance.

Some possible indications of attrition as opposed to true repentance:

- Denial comes first, and confession only after the proof is irrefutable.
- The person only confesses as much as is known about their sin by others. They don't initially come clean on their own with all the details.
- They may be remorseful or sorry for what they did but they also communicate a sense of being a victim in it all and they may try to spread the blame around.
- They may use minimizing words or terms when referring to their sin.
- They may be agreeable to the idea of restitution or asking forgiveness of the offended party but they are not the ones who ever bring it up.
- They do not take the lead, or any serious action, (with the exception of minor actions for show) in changing their lives to remove the things that put them in temptation's way.

All of these may come with many tears and much sorrow and even confession, but these things are not repentance. It is not loving, kind or merciful to treat attrition as if it were true biblical repentance.

What is true repentance?

The other type of repentance that the bible speaks of is God-centered and God-focused.

Webster defines it this way;

"Real penitence; sorrow or deep contrition for sin, as an offense and dishonor to God, a violation of his holy law, and the basest ingratitude towards a Being of infinite benevolence. This is called evangelical repentance, and is accompanied and followed by amendment of life."

"Repentance is a change of mind, or a conversion from sin to God."

"Repentance is the relinquishment of any practice, from conviction that it has offended God."

This type of repentance is also called *contrition*, and is defined as;

"Penitence; deep sorrow for sin; grief of heart for having offended an infinitely holy and benevolent God. The word is usually understood to mean genuine penitence, accompanied with a deep sense of ingratitude in the sinner, and sincere resolution to live in obedience to the divine law."

The Westminster Shorter Catechism says this about repentance; "Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience."

Paul tells us that true repentance follows from godly sorrow. Sorrow for having offended God by sinning against Him, violating his laws and dishonoring His name. Godly sorrow comes not from fear of punishment but the realization of the vileness of sin. This type of repentance turns us away from sin and towards God, with no regrets. A good example of godly sorrow and repentance can be found in Psalm 51. The mark of true repentance then is hatred of the sin, turning from it and turning to God. Repentance is tied to faith and faith to obedience. True repentance is a gift of God. (2Ti 2:25; Act 11:18)

Paul says in 2 Co 7:9-11 (ISV)

"Now I am happy, not because you had such sorrow, but because your sorrow led you to repent. For you were sorry in a godly way, and so you were not hurt by us in any way. For having sorrow in a godly way results in repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regrets. But the sorrow of the world produces death. See what great earnestness godly sorrow has produced in you! How ready you are to clear yourselves, how indignant, how alarmed, how full of longing and enthusiasm, how eager to seek justice! In every way you have demonstrated that you are innocent in this matter."

From this we can see some indications of true repentance, the "fruit that is consistent with repentance!"

- Earnestness - ready to face-up and deal with the sin, no game playing.
- Clear themselves -ready to come clean, confess all. Stop what they are doing.
- Indignant - godly anger or disdain against their sin.
- Alarmed - about the possible consequences or results of their sin.
- Longing and enthusiasm - To restore intimacy and set themselves right with God.
- Eager to seek justice - to give reparation and satisfaction to all who were wronged.

Those who confess and truly repent should/will be confident of God's forgiveness and acceptance because they know God is faithful. (1Jn 1:9)

How are we to know if someone is expressing true repentance?

As was said before, only God knows the heart. We should treat others as we would like to be treated. And we should be willing to take people at their word initially and be quick to forgive and restore relationship and fellowship. If a person has wronged us, acknowledged the wrong and expressed repentance we should accept it as genuine unless we have reason to question its authenticity. If it happens again we might be gracious and take them at their word again but restoring relationship and fellowship might not be so quick. If it happens again we might be willing to restore the relationship but only after we see some real fruit, over time, consistent with repentance. By now the trust level in the relationship might be severely damaged. If it happens again we might rightfully begin to wonder if the person is really repentant at all.

Now all that was extremely general and how we respond (or expect people to respond to us) is very dependent on the type and severity of the transgression. A child leaving their dirty clothes on the floor instead of putting them in the clothes hamper is very different from a spouse being involved in an affair. In more weighty matters it is not unreasonable for there to be an extended period of time that helps prove that the repentance is authentic and thorough. If the church is involved or even in a family there might be some other requirements that the transgressor might need to meet in order for the restoration process to proceed. But we need to be careful putting up a lot of fences for people to help them stay on the path. A truly repentant person will work to put up their own fences. People can follow lots of rules without ever having a change of heart. Jesus didn't say "if someone's hand causes them to sin cut it off for them" He said "if *your* hand causes *you* to sin cut it off".

APPENDIX – B

Overlooking an offense, covering a sin

What is the difference between?

- Overlooking an offense
- Covering a sin

Overlooking an offense:

Pro 19:11 Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.

Rom 15:1 we who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.

1Pe 4:8 above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.

This sense of overlooking describes acknowledgement of the offense and a deliberate choice to let it go or “pass over” it, as it is translated in the KJV. It is a type of forgiveness that implies looking past the offense; not letting it stop or slow us down, not talking about it or dwelling on it- we release it to God, we don’t keep record of the wrong and we keep on going. Wisdom or “good sense” would have us to ponder and consider the severity of the offense and determine if love would be served in making issue of it. With minor offenses it is to our credit and God’s glory to “bear with” and overlook (the *attitude* of forgiveness) them.

Covering a sin:

Pro 17:9 whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.

Pro 10:12 Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.

Covering a sin is not referring to hiding un-repent-ed-of sin, but rather protecting the reputation of the *repentant* wrong doer. We all have sinned against family and friends and when we have confessed our sin and repented aren’t we thankful when the matter is kept between us and the one(s) we sinned against. In church contexts it might mean not talking about situations we may be aware of having to do with others sins, shortcomings or falls that they may have repented of or are in the process of dealing with. In situations where we are involved it would mean not telling anyone more than they absolutely need to know, if they do need to know. Where the sin may have been particularly serious much wisdom and prayer need to be exercised before deciding what covering might look like or if it would be appropriate.

Covering a sin as described above is an act of love and consideration for a brother or sister in the Lord. Special consideration and wisdom must be applied where the sin being covered may be of a nature where there are legal requirements for reporting the matter and where civil authorities come to have legal jurisdiction. In addition, even though God’s forgiveness is total and complete sometimes, given the nature of the sin, the consequences of the sin may remain in one form or another. God does not necessarily remove the consequences of the sin. For instance; if someone is caught stealing money from the church it might preclude them from being in a ministry position where they handle money. Even though the person has repented and been forgiven, wisdom would dictate that it is not reasonable to expect people to be comfortable with the offender being back in that type of position.

APPENDIX – C

Key passages of Scripture regarding church discipline

Hebrews 12:14-16

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholily like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.

Ephesians 5:11

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

Matthew 18:15-17

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

1 Corinthians 5:1,2,5-7,11-13

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. . . . you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. . . . Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. . . . But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges[c] those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

Galatians 6:1-2

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

James 5:19-20

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.

1 Thessalonians 5:14

And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive . . . (NIV)

2 Thessalonians 3:6,14-15

But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us. . . . And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. (NKJV)

1 Timothy 5:20

As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.

Proverbs 27:5

Better is open rebuke than hidden love.

Titus 3:10-11

As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

Romans 16:17

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.

2 John 1:9-11

Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. . . If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

2 Corinthians 7:9-11

Now I am happy, not because you had such sorrow, but because your sorrow led you to repent. For you were sorry in a godly way, and so you were not hurt by us in any way. For having sorrow in a godly way results in repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regrets. But the sorrow of the world produces death. See what great earnestness godly sorrow has produced in you! How ready you are to clear yourselves, how indignant, how alarmed, how full of longing and enthusiasm, how eager to seek justice! In every way you have demonstrated that you are innocent in this matter. (ISV)

APPENDIX – D

What God's Word has to say about discipline

Deu 11:2

And consider today (since I am not speaking to your children who have not known or seen it), consider the discipline of the LORD your God, his greatness, his mighty hand and his outstretched arm,

Job 5:17

"Behold, blessed is the one whom God reproveth; therefore despise not the discipline of the Almighty.

Psa 94:12

Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O LORD, and whom you teach out of your law,

Pro 3:11-12

My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.

Pro 5:22-23

The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him, and he is held fast in the cords of his sin. He dies for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he is led astray.

Pro 6:23

For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life,

Pro 12:1

Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid.

Pro 15:10

There is severe discipline for him who forsakes the way; whoever hates reproof will die.

Eph 6:4

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Heb 12:5

And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him.

Heb 12:7-8

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

Heb 12:11

For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Rev 3:19

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.

2Ti 4:2

preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

When & How Our Congregation Should Be Informed of Disciplinary Action Taken by the Elders Toward Someone in Our Congregation

1. There are a number of disciplinary mandates in the Bible that require some form of congregational notification if they are to be carried out effectively. The common denominator in each and every case is a person in the church who persists unrepentantly and blatantly in a pattern of gross behavior clearly prohibited in the Bible. In these cases strong disciplinary action for each is prescribed in the Bible: In the case of an unrepentant brother . . . (Matt. 18:17)

“tell it to the church . . . and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector”

Obeying Jesus’ command to “tell it to the church” so that the church can confront the sinner may, or may not, require involving the whole congregation. This could be accomplished by “telling church leaders” or a representative group of the congregation. However, treating the sinner who won’t listen to the church or its leaders as “a pagan or tax collector” would seem to require participation from others in the larger congregation to some degree.

In the case of a brother who does not living according to Paul’s teaching . . . (2 Thess. 3:6, 14 - 15)

“Keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us . . . take special note of him. Do not associate with him in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.”

Paul’s instruction here is given not just to an individual, but to the whole congregation at Thessalonica. To effectively make someone “feel ashamed” it would seem to require participation from others in the congregation “warning the person” and refusing to “associate” with him or her.

In the case of an immoral brother . . . (1 Cor. 5:4 – 5)

“When you are assembled in the name in the name of our Lord Jesus . . . hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.”

In this case Paul explicitly instructs the Corinthian church to carry out this most severe of all disciplinary actions (excommunication) at a church assembly of some kind.

In the case of a sinning elder . . . (1 Tim. 5:20)

“Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly so that others may take warning.”

Similarly, Paul explicitly instructs Timothy to publicly rebuke sinning elders. This is something, of course, that would require the congregation to be present, especially if it is going to serve as a “warning” (as Paul intends) to others in the congregation.

In the case of a divisive person . . . (Titus 3:10 NIV)

“Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him.”

Since this command is directed toward one individual (Titus), it is possible Paul intended the warning to a divisive person, at least the first one, to be delivered to him or her privately. However, especially in the light of Paul’s additional instruction to Titus in the same letter (1:10 – 16), it would be hard to imagine how Titus could carry out the second half of the command “have nothing to do with him” without asking others in the church to join him in this.

2. **There are a number of practical questions related to how the congregation is involved in or informed by church leaders in disciplinary cases that are not answered by biblical directives.** These are questions that are left for the leaders in every church to answer as they strive to faithfully follow the biblical mandates above.

Who constitutes “the church”, “the assembly,” or “the congregation” in the case of a sinning believer?

Everybody who attends? Only members or adult members? Only those in our congregation that personally know the person or who are in community with him or her? Are there times this should be done differently in large multi-cell churches like ours than in single-cell churches that existed in New Testament times?

When and how should our church be informed or involved in the cases of disciplinary action taken by the leadership?

Always or on a “need to know” basis? In a public service? At a special members’ meeting? By letter?

When should a person be rebuked publicly in front of our whole church?

When they are leaders whether they are repentant or not? When the sin is against our whole congregation or affects our whole congregation? When they are seeking forgiveness or reconciliation with the whole church?

3. The Elders and Pastors of our church seek to answer the questions above on a case by case basis using the following principles to guide them:

The principle of redemptive love toward the offender

Since the purpose or goal of all discipline in the Bible is first and foremost to call the offender to repentance and redeem him or her from their destructive ways (Hebrews 12:10 - 11), we seek to determine on a case by case basis what level of participation we will need from our congregation to most effectively accomplish this.

The principle of pastoral protection of the congregation

Since another important purpose of discipline in the Bible is to protect the rest of our congregation from being harmed or tempted by the ongoing sinful patterns of the offender (2

Cor. 5:6 – 12), we seek to determine on a case by case basis what we need to tell or how we need to direct our congregation in order to protect or warn them from being harmed by contact with the offender or from falling into the same sinful patterns of the offender (I Tim. 5:20; Rom. 16:17).

The principle of vindicating the name and honor of Jesus Christ

Since one other important purpose of discipline in the Bible is to vindicate the name and honor of Christ by disassociating His name and church from those who practice evil (I Cor. 5:1; Romans 16:17 – 19), we seek to determine on a case by case basis what kind action must be taken by our church to disassociate itself from those who are publicly known to practice evil.

Utilizing these three principles the Elders and Pastors of our church decide on a case by case basis when, how, and what to communicate to our congregation about the disciplinary actions they have taken toward offenders in our church. This may or may not include one or more of the following modes of communication:

- 1) Communications to the leadership community of our church (by letters or in meetings)
- 2) Communications to those individuals or groups in our church community who are in contact or relationship with the offender (by letters or in meetings)
- 3) Communications to all those who are members of our church (by letters or in meetings)
- 4) Communications to all those who attend our church (by letters or in our services)