

CHURCH DISCIPLINE PROCESS

Revised November 2021

I

Introduction

On this side of eternity, believers struggle and war with their flesh. They also war with the powers arrayed against the kingdom of God. In this age of plurality with its moral ambiguity and aversion to absolute truth, the Village Church of Barrington (VCB) believes adherence to the absolute truth of the Scriptures is essential. We accept our duty and obligation to the Body of Christ and each other, to hold one another accountable in love to the truth of Scripture.

God is the primary discipliner in the life of a Christian (Heb 12:6). He lovingly disciplines his own children for their good, that they might share in his holiness (Heb 12:10). They are sanctified through the process, molding them into the image and likeness of Christ, as they hope in the culmination of their salvation—glorification (Rom 8:17, 30).

The Church, being God's gatekeeper of truth, may also partake in the discipline of Christian members within its fellowship. Discipline is carried out in loving concern for the one being disciplined and in keeping with the principles of Matthew 18 (cp. 1 Cor 5:12-13; 2 Cor 2:6-8). Church discipline benefits the local and universal Body of Christ by assuring that its members walk in the Spirit and not the flesh. It has as its ultimate goal the restoration of the member undergoing discipline and an admonishment to the church as a whole.

This position paper will review the guiding scriptural texts, the goals of church discipline, and the process so that future generations of VCB elders would be guided by them. These policies and procedures are to be explicitly and clearly taught in VCB church membership classes, to obtain the *informed consent* of its members.¹ Thus, church membership classes would be mandatory for church membership.

II

Guides and Goals

The basis and pattern of discipline is the nature of God himself (1 Pet 1:16; Heb 12:11). The Word of God, the Bible, is our guide (1 Cor 5:1-13; Matt 18:17-18; Titus 3:10; 2 Thes 3:6-15; 1 Tim 5:20; Gal 6:1). The Scriptures teach that the purposes and goals of discipline are multiple:

1. to bring glory to God and enhance the testimony of the flock;
2. to restore, heal, and edify and restore believers in the Lord (Matt 18:15; 2 Thes 3:14-15; Heb 12:10-13; Gal 6:1-2; Jam 5:20);
3. to produce a healthy faith, sound in doctrine (Titus 1:13; 1 Tim 1:19-20);

¹ To secure this legal defense, VCB needs to be able to prove to a court that the person complaining of a wrong was in fact fully aware of the church's policies and procedures, and knowingly agreed to be bound by them through church membership. See Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 129, 134, 138.

4. to win a soul to Christ, if they are not yet a believer (2 Tim 2:24-26);
5. to silence false teachers and their influence in the church (Titus 1:10-11);
6. to set an example for the rest of the body and promote godly fear (1 Tim 5:20);
7. to protect the church against the destructive consequences that occur when churches fail to carry out church discipline.

A church that fails to exercise proper discipline experiences four losses: loss of purity (1 Cor 5:6-7); loss of power (Josh 7); loss of progress (Rev 2:5; 3:16); and loss of purpose (1 Pet 1:14-16; 2:9-15).

Matters resulting in the need for church discipline include:

- difficulties between members (Matt 5:15-17);
- divisive or factious people (Rom 16:17-18; Titus 3:9-11);
- immoral conduct of members such as those mentioned in 1 Cor 5 and Gal 5:19-21, including deeds of the flesh such as incest, immorality, covetousness, idolatry, abusive speech, drunkenness, swindling, indecent behavior, angry outbursts, spreading dissension (1 Cor 5:1, 11; 2 Thes 3:10-15);
- false, erroneous teaching and views which concern the fundamentals of the faith, not minor differences of interpretation (1 Tim 1:20; 2 Tim 2:17-18; 2 Tim 3:1-5; also implied in Rev 2:14-16; Phil 3:2-3, 15-19; Rom 16:17-18).

The primary motive of VCB discipline is to assist the offender in being restored to fellowship with the Lord, and secondarily to his brothers and sisters in Christ. Church discipline is not to be heavy-handed or taken lightly, but rather to be administered with caution and care.

III *The Process*

The process of church discipline is found in Matthew 18:15-17.

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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.

Practically, this first-line accountability will take place between the offender and those closest to him or her, such as a spouse, family member, friend, small group member, or mentor. Hopefully, this personal acquaintance would be able to work with the offender before the situation reaches a level of crisis, or the sin becomes an unrepentant pattern of behavior. Thus, the majority of such occasions are kept private, known only to God and those directly involved. This part of the process would involve as few people as possible.

However, if the offender does not heed the initial appeals, the restorer must enlist the help of another who has higher authority within the church such as a small group leader, a deacon, or

ministry leader, elder or pastor. The offense must be verified. The newly involved leader is to approach the offender in love, grace, firmness, prayer, and humility, with the hope of restoration.

If the offender continues to rebuff all such accountability, those directly involved should take the matter to the church in accordance with the constitutional bylaws of the Village Church of Barrington. This step is carried out by the elders as representatives of the church and in keeping with their responsibilities to shepherd the church. The elders shall investigate the matter further, conducting interviews of those involved, praying about the matter, validating or invalidating concerns, and beseeching the offender to repent of any verified sins. The elders also institute any steps they deem necessary to protect the body, always leaving room for the offender to be restored to fellowship within the church. The elders shall also prepare a written statement, outlining for all concerned, the offense and the necessary steps to be taken by the offender to meet with the elders or to be fully restored.

Church leaders are held to a higher standard (Jam 3:1). Any allegation against a pastor, elder, deacon, officer, or ministry leader requires at least two witnesses to corroborate (1 Tim 5:19-20). If the allegations are verified, the individual shall be removed from church leadership. In the case of pastors or elders, outside counsel might also be involved. Public rebuke is required for those who continue in sin. All other matters of church discipline would not be discussed publicly.

If the one undergoing church discipline should repent and show genuine fruits of repentance, the process towards expulsion would be halted. The fruits of repentance would be evident through behavioral change and would include restitution to those wronged, seeking forgiveness of those offended, and appropriate accountability systems to safeguard against relapse. An offender will be assigned an elder as their accountability contact. This elder would oversee their progress toward restoration. Each offender would be notified of the status of their discipline and restoration progress through a periodic written report.

If after an extended period of time no progress is made, or the offender refuses to meet with the elders or receive counsel, but rather continues willfully in sin, the offender will be removed from church membership. The church body would be notified of the excommunication. The offender would be likewise notified by certified mail, warning him or her of the scriptural implications of this removal from the church body.

The following passages warn us that keeping an unrepentant and rebellious member within the body can harm the entire body.² They address the difficult realities and purposes in the expulsion of the offender:

- to *“purge the evil person from among you”* (1 Cor 5:13);
- 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”* (1 Cor 5:5);
- to *“have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.”* (2 Thes 3:14);
- *“Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother”* (2 Thes 3:15);

² The one undergoing church discipline may attend worship services only for the purpose of receiving instruction from God’s Word (assuming no legal restrictions or possibility of harm). They would be restricted from any fellowship or service events of the church. Any interactions would be germane to the issue of repentance rather than characterized by casual conversation. (Leeman, 76, 140).

- *“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”* (Titus 3:10-11); and
- to *“let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector”* (Matt 18:17).

Due to the detailed and prolonged nature of the discipline process, and private details reviewed by the elders, the Constitution of The Village Church of Barrington states that “the elders have oversight responsibility to enforce church discipline.”³ Therefore, no disciplinary case would be discussed at a congregational level. The congregation would only be notified of an expulsion in order to break fellowship and to pray for those involved, and their restoration. The church should not fail to invite the disciplined individual to attend services so that he may continue to receive instruction from God’s Word (assuming there are no legal restrictions or possibility of harm). However, any interactions should be germane to the issue of repentance.

Issues of abuse are to be addressed in accordance with the church policy in the document entitled “Divorce and Remarriage.”⁴

The attitude of the body is to pray for the one outcast that they would return to Christ and seek repentance: *“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”* (Jam 5:19-20). The purpose of church discipline is to hopefully restore the repentant offender: *“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”* (Gal 6:1).

The process is described in 2 Cor 2:5-10. When a wayward sheep repents and rejoins the fold, that person is to be forgiven and welcomed in love, fully restored to the fellowship. The congregational welcome should be public, just as the expulsion was. The longevity of the process of church discipline is determined in large part by how long it takes to convince all parties involved that the offender is characteristically repentant.⁵

IV *Conclusion*

Church discipline is a difficult and trying responsibility, one that our culture does not recognize or respect. Nevertheless, the Elders of the Village Church of Barrington seek to obey and carry out church discipline for the sake of the Church, the health of the body, the restoration of the offender, and the glory of God.

³ “VCB Constitution and By-Laws” (Village Church of Barrington, August 2015), 8.

⁴ “Position Paper on Divorce and Remarriage” (Village of Church of Barrington).

⁵ Leeman, 68, 73.