

# CARING ENOUGH TO CORRECT

## *CORRECTION, DISCIPLINE, RECONCILIATION, AND RESTORATION IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

### A POSITION PAPER BY THE ELDERS OF FAITH BIBLE CHURCH

As provided in Article IV, Section D of the Constitution of Faith Bible Church, this position paper, along with the procedures contained in the policy manual, constitutes the position of the elders of Faith Bible Church regarding correction. This position paper may be revised from time to time by the Elders of Faith Bible Church and the latest revision supersedes prior versions.

References to persons initiating correction or persons receiving correction in this paper using the pronouns "he, him, his, they" etc., are intended in the generic sense and include both men and women.

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## INTRODUCTION

An essential part of progress is the correction of error. Yet correction within the church is often left undone. When correction is attempted it is often done with the wrong method. Or it may be done for the wrong purpose or with the wrong motives in mind:

It may be done out of anger.

It may be done out of a desire to

- get back at someone for what they have done.
- get even with them for the pain that they have caused.
- get ahead of them by making them look bad.

Correction is essential for a healthy church body. Uncorrected error can spread through the church body like a cancer which ultimately may require radical surgery to cut it out and remove it. The body's functions could then be left impaired and recovery could be long and painful. There seems to be considerable confusion within the body of Christ, however, regarding:

What is correction and why should we do it?

When should we correct and when should we accept certain behaviors?

Who is responsible for correction? How is correction to be carried out?

Correction is frequently confused with discipline (these terms will be defined below). This makes it more difficult to determine when and how to handle problems. This also makes it more difficult to determine who is responsible for handling the problem.

What then do you decide to do when you become aware that another Christian is living in a manner which is contrary to the principles or commands of Scripture? Do you ignore it and just "let it go?" Do you speak with your friends about it in order to elicit advice and prayer? Do you report it to the pastor and let him deal with it? Do you deal with it yourself? Perhaps you are not sure what you should do.

There are at least four common types of responses to sin in the church. Perhaps you can identify with one of them:

1. Miss Positive downplays the sin, or simply ignores it. She loves the person too much to risk hurting their feelings or discouraging them. Besides, they will probably grow out of it on their own anyway.
2. Mr. Neutral feels that "it's not my job" and does not want to get involved. He just leaves it for someone else to take care of. After all, that's what the pastor gets paid for.
3. Mrs. Negative is first to spot any error and point it out to anyone who will listen. She is the first one to the front of the church after a sermon to let the pastor know if he made a mistake. She is the first one to call the organizer of an event to let them know that there was one part that she didn't like. She rarely gives any praise, except as the lead-in for criticism. After all, someone has to point out the errors or there would be no growth.
4. Finally we have Mr. Concerned. He sees the problem but he is not sure whether it is actually a sin or just a difference of opinion. He knows that the person will not grow if they are not corrected and he loves them enough to try. But perhaps he is a little bit unsure about exactly what to do.

Correction is a necessary part of growth. Correction of known sin within the body of Christ, the Church, is a command of Scripture. But it must be done in a positive, loving manner with the person's best interest in view. Correction is a form of encouragement, not a vindictive inquisition or a witch-hunt. The goal of correction is reconciliation, not retribution.

The following pages then will outline the general philosophy and purpose, as well as give specific procedures for the exercise of constructive correction.

## **A THE PHILOSOPHY OF CONSTRUCTIVE CORRECTION**

### **A.1 WHY CORRECTION IS NECESSARY.**

By the time of Christ, the Jewish religious leaders had identified 613 commands in the Mosaic Law; 365 negative and 248 positive. But Jesus summarized the whole law in two general commands; love God and love your neighbor.

*" ... 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself. 'All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'" (Matthew 22:35-39).*

Love is our goal and our guide. God and our neighbors are the objects of that love. As will be shown, the practice of loving God and our neighbor will necessarily involve correction.

### **A.2 LOVING GOD INVOLVES CORRECTION**

Loving God demands that we uphold His honor in the church. This involves, in part, teaching the truth and correcting error. This is part of the process of "making disciples" which is the Great Commission:

*"Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and MAKE DISCIPLES of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and TEACHING THEM TO OBEY EVERYTHING I HAVE COMMANDED YOU'." (Matthew 28:18-20).*

"Disciple" and "discipline" come from the same root word. "Disciple" means one who has been taught and who is obedient to those teachings. "Discipline" means to correct by bringing someone into conformity or obedience through instruction or training.

In the context of the great commission the content of the word "teaching" is "to obey everything I have commanded you." The process of making disciples then involves teaching them obedience to Christ's commands.

Teaching obviously involves the correction of error. But discipline specifically involves shaping the will in obedience. Correction is a broader term which simply means removing an error and making something right. Discipline, which is part of correction, is more specific and means teaching someone to obey. You can correct a machine, for example, but you wouldn't normally speak of disciplining a machine. Correction focuses on external behavior. Discipline focuses on the decisions behind that behavior. Both correction and discipline are necessary for the health of the church.

Scripture makes it clear that correction and discipline are aspects of love:

*"... 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son'. Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." (Hebrews 12:5-11. See also Rev. 3:19 and Prov.13:24).*

God corrects those whom He loves. Correction is an inherent part of love. And correction is an inherent part of our commission as Christians (cf. Col. 5:18-20). We demonstrate our love for God when we lovingly correct His children.

### **A.3 LOVING OUR NEIGHBOR INVOLVES CORRECTION**

Loving those around us, especially those in the body of Christ, is a continuous commitment for every Christian. Paul put it this way;

*"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law (Romans 13:8).*

Love demands that we do what is best for someone. This may not necessarily be what they want or prefer. Love has their best interest at heart, and this will be reflected in the way that we go about correcting them. Paul described love this way:

*"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails." (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).*

Consider how Paul's description of love might be applied to the context of correction:

**LOVE IS PATIENT.** Love does not jump to conclusions before checking the facts at the source. Love is aware that change takes time and that growth may be slow.

**LOVE IS KIND.** Love corrects with compassion and mercy.

**LOVE IS NOT ENVIOUS, BOASTFUL, OR PROUD.** Love is aware that "there but for the grace of God go I."

**LOVE IS NOT RUDE OR SELF-SEEKING.** Love seeks to build bridges, not burn them. Love puts the well-being of others ahead of itself.

LOVE IS NOT EASILY ANGERED. *"Let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God" (James 1:19-20).*

LOVE KEEPS NO RECORD OF WRONGS. Love is not keeping score. Forgiveness means we will not keep bringing up that which has been forgiven.

LOVE DOES NOT DELIGHT IN EVIL BUT REJOICES WITH THE TRUTH. Love is not looking for trouble. Love is not out to punish but rejoices when truth triumphs.

LOVE ALWAYS PROTECTS the reputation and privacy of each person. It does not give a bad report about someone without first checking the facts with that person.

LOVE ALWAYS TRUSTS AND ALWAYS HOPES for the best. Love presumes each person's innocence until proven otherwise. Love expects that there may be another explanation for the facts or that they may be incorrect about the facts themselves. Love never jumps to conclusions.

LOVE ALWAYS PERSEVERES AND NEVER FAILS. Love never quits even in the face of rejection.

*Love compels and controls correction.*

#### **A.4 THE LEADERS OF THE CHURCH ARE COMMANDED TO CORRECT**

In addition to the general commands listed above, the elders of the church are specifically charged with correcting those in error.

*"(The Elder) must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers ... They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach ..." (Titus 1:9-11).*

*"Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned" (Titus 3:10-11).*

Paul's own ministry was a model of concern for the church. He reminded the elders of the church at Ephesus that:

*" ... You know how I lived the whole time I was with you ... You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you ... Therefore I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers ... Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears" (Acts 20:18-31).*

Scripture instructs the members of the church to accept the correction of the elders since God has given the elders the responsibility for the oversight of the church.

*"Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Hebrews 13:17).*

The guidelines of Scripture are clear: all Christians in general, and the leaders of the church in particular, are given the responsibility for correcting error within the church.

A look at Biblical history as well as church history will show that correction has always been an integral part of God's plan for His people.

## A.5 THE HISTORY OF CORRECTION

Biblical history reveals a long record of correction and discipline. In fact, it forms one of the central themes of Scripture. Consider this *partial* summary:

Adam and Eve disciplined and driven from the garden (Gen. 3).  
Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed (Gen. 18-19).  
Saul disciplined by Samuel (I Sam. 13:13-14).  
David disciplined by Nathan (II Samuel 12:1-25).  
Ananias and Sapphira disciplined by God (Acts 5:1-11).  
Apollos corrected by Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:24-26).  
Corinthian sinner disciplined by Paul (I Cor. 5 and II Cor. 2:5-7).  
Peter corrected by Paul (Galatians 2:11-21).

Church history also reveals that correction and discipline have been a central part of the program of the church.

The *Belgic Confession* (c.1561) recognized the preaching of the pure doctrine of the Gospel, the administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ, and church discipline as the marks of a true church (*Belgic Confession*, XXIX).

William Ames, one of the great theologians of the reformation (c.1629) also wrote that "*Discipline is associated with the word and sacraments ... discipline is usually associated by the best theologians with the word and sacraments in the marks of the church (The Marrow of Theology, XXXVII).*"

Richard Baxter, one of the prominent preachers of the English reformation put it this way;

*"To be against discipline is to be against the pastoral ministry; and to be against the pastoral ministry is to be against the Church, and to be against the Church is to be against Christ" (The Reformed Pastor; p.84J.*

The reformers and their followers generally agreed on this point. However that does not mean these beliefs have been consistently applied in church history. Consider these additional quotations from the same two men;

*"Take discipline in the church. What has been talked about or prayed over more in the past few years? Yet when it comes to its exercise and practice, most of us do nothing about it" (Richard Baxter, The Reformed Pastor; p.57).*

*"The true reason why the discipline of Christ is solidly constituted and exercised with doctrine in so few churches is because most of those who would seem to know Christ and to hope in him refuse to receive the whole kingship of Christ and yield themselves completely to him. As discipline is part of the kingship of Christ, so it is also part of the gospel. For it is the holy manner of promoting the gospel ordained by the gospel itself. Therefore those who reject discipline accept neither the whole kingship of Christ nor the whole gospel" (William Ames, Marrow of Theology; XXXVII).*

Paul rebuked the Corinthian church for their failure to discipline a known and unrepentant sinner (cf. I Corinthians 5). That inconsistency between philosophy and practice has remained down through history.

Perhaps our own American emphasis on freedom without commitment, liberty without limits, and rights without responsibilities has also contributed to our lack of commitment to loving and compassionate correction.

But while we have sometimes failed in our practice, the Biblical philosophy of correction still remains clear:

Our Command  
Love God Love His People

Our Commission  
Make Disciples

Our command and our commission will require that there be correction within the church.

## **B THE PURPOSE OF CONSTRUCTIVE CORRECTION**

In general, correction in the church serves five goals:

### **B.1 TO HONOR AND GLORIFY GOD.**

*"To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy- to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore!" (Jude 24-25).*

### **B.2 TO ENCOURAGE AND STRENGTHEN THE CHRISTIAN**

*"No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12: 11. cf. also II Cor. 7:8-13).*

### **B.3 TO RECONCILE AND RESTORE THOSE WHO ARE ALIENATED BY SIN**

*"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (Galatians 6:1).*

*"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over" (Matthew 18:15).*

*"The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him, now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him" (II Corinthians 2:6-7).*

### **B.4 TO PROTECT THE PURITY OF THE CHURCH**

*"But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure:*

*No immoral impure or greedy person- such a man is an idolater- has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them ... Be very careful then, how you live- not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil ... Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:3-21. ct. also Eph. 5:25-27; Col. 1:22; Titus 1:10-16; Rev. 2:2,14,15,20-25).*

### **B.5 TO DETER FURTHER SIN IN THE INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIAN AND IN THE CHURCH.**

*"Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events" (Acts 5:5 & 11).*

*"If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, 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" (II Thess. 3: 14-15. cf. also I Tim. 5:20; II Cor.7:10-11).*

Scripture makes the philosophy and purpose of correction clear. But *how* do we correct in a loving and constructive way? Scripture is equally clear in this regard.

## **C THE PROCEDURE OF CONSTRUCTIVE CORRECTION**

Not everything which we dislike about a person is a cause for correction. Some issues simply reflect a difference of preference or emphasis. Therefore, the first step in the process of correction must be to identify which issues actually need correction.

### **C.1 WHEN IS CORRECTION APPROPRIATE?**

Matthew 18:15, Luke 17:3, and Galatians 6:1 indicate that sin requires correction. On the other hand, Romans 14 encourages tolerance in matters where there is simply a difference of opinion or preference.

In other words, is the issue at hand a sin, a conviction, or a personal preference?

1. If it is a sin then it needs correction (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1).
2. If it is a personal conviction then an attempt at changing the other person's mind may be made but correction is not in order (Rom.14).
3. If it is a personal preference then tolerance is needed.

*"We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up (Rom. 15:1-2).*

If it is sin then it can be found, at least in principle, in Scripture.

Sin means 'to miss the mark, to fall short of the goal. It is an attitude, action, or belief which violates God's character or commands. More specifically, it is a violation of Scriptural commands, guidelines or normative examples.

Galatians 5:19-21 gives an overview of "sin":

*"The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like."*

We can summarize these into six general categories of sin:

1. Sexual immorality. (sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery)
2. Doctrine and worship. (idolatry and witchcraft)
3. Personal relationships. (hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition)
4. Church relationships. (dissensions, factions and envy)
5. Disorderliness. (drunkenness, orgies)
6. Etc. ("and the like").

See also:

- other general lists  
1 Cor. 6:9-10; Mark 7:21-23; II Tim. 3:2-7.

- false teachings or beliefs

Romans 16:17; Gal. 1:9; I Tim. 1:19-20; 6:3-5,20-21; II Tim. 2:17-18,24-26; Titus 1:9; 3:10-11.

- false behavior

I Thes. 5:14-15; II Thes. 3:6, 14-15; II Tim. 3:1-5; III John 9:10.

- some situations which require separation from certain people:

Prov. 14:7; Rom. 16:17-19; I Cor. 5:1-13, 15:33; II Cor. 6:14-18; Eph. 5:11-12; Titus 3:10-11; II John 9-11.

While many specific sins could be enumerated and would be cause for correction, ultimately only one motive will cause a person to resist the correction of known sin to the point of receiving formal church discipline. That motive is Pride.

H.J .A. Bouman puts it this way:

*"There is always only one sin that excludes from the fellowship of God's people, and that is not the specific sin that first evokes our concern. It is rather the sinning brother's unwillingness to 'hear' the pleas and admonitions of his brethren, the sin of persisting on the sinful course and of refusing to come to repentance"*

Correction is appropriate then when someone's attitudes, actions or beliefs are contrary to God's character or commands as revealed in Scripture through specific commands, guidelines, or normative examples.

Sin prompts correction. But how do we correct in a way which will be constructive?

## **C.2 HOW DO WE CORRECT?**

### **C.2.a GENERAL GUIDELINES: OUR ATTITUDE**

Words like "admonish, rebuke, reprove and exhort" occur more than 100 times in the New Testament. The command is clear. But how do we do it?

Several passages in Scripture outline for us the general attitude with which we are to approach our relationships with other people, and specifically with regard to correction.

In Micah 6:8 God outlines three general principles for our relationships:

*"He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).*

We are not only to appreciate justice or righteousness, but we are to actually do it. We are not only to appreciate mercy but we are to love it. And we are to walk before and with God with an attitude of humility.

But these three attributes are to be kept in balance. One should not supersede another. Our desire to do what is right should not supersede our desire to demonstrate mercy to our brothers and sisters. But our desire to be merciful and compassionate should not short-circuit our desire to do what is right and to correct what is wrong. And correction must not be done out of anger, self-righteousness, or pride. It must be done in humility recognizing that we too are sinners.

Our relationships are to be characterized then by justice, tempered with mercy, and carried out in humility before God.



Paul reflects these same values in Galatians 6:1. After defining the difference between those who are "spiritual" (i.e.; characterized by the fruit of the spirit and lives of righteousness - Gal.5:22-26) and those who are "carnal" (i.e.; characterized by worldly interests and values - Gal. 5:19-21), Paul gives this instruction:

*"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you may also be tempted" (Galatians 6:1).*

"You who are spiritual" indicates righteousness. "Gently" indicates correction with mercy and compassion. "Watch yourself" indicates correction with humility.

Several other passages also give insight as to our attitude in correction:

*"Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity" (I Tim. 5:1).*

*"Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others might take warning. I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism" (I Tim. 5:19-21).*

*"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?" (I Cor. 5:1-2).*

*"If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, 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" (II Thess. 3:14-15).*

*"Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will" (II Tim. 2:22-26).*

*(See also Philippians 2:1-11; Hebrews 10:24; Ephesians 4:14-16).*

In addition to these general guidelines, Scripture also provides specific guidance concerning how to correct.

## **C.2.b SPECIFIC GUIDELINES: OUR ACTIONS - THE PROCESS OF CORRECTION**

The only step-by-step outline of the process of correction in scripture is given by Jesus Himself in Matthew 18:15-20. This discussion falls between Christ's teaching on humility and compassion (vv. 1-14), and his teaching on forgiveness (vv. 21-35), and outlines four basic steps for correction.

*"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he 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 he refuses to listen to them, 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" (Matt. 18:15-17).*

### **C.2.b.i      STEP 1: GO TO THEM IN PRIVATE**

*"IF YOUR BROTHER SINS AGAINST YOU, GO AND SHOW HIM HIS FAULT, JUST BETWEEN THE TWO OF YOU. IF HE LISTENS TO YOU, YOU HAVE WON YOUR BROTHER OVER"  
(Matt. 18:15).*

Jesus points out that we are discussing the sin of a "brother" (cf. also I Cor. 5:9-12 where Paul draws a clear distinction between the church and unbelievers. See also Galatians 6:1; where "restore him" implies that the erring person is a Christian). In other words, the discussion is limited to correction of sin within the body of Christ. Non-Christians need evangelism more than correction since their position before Christ is the root issue, not their external actions.

And the issue at hand is "sin," not just a difference of opinion, preference, tradition, or even conviction. The words "against you" do not appear in all of the early manuscripts. But whether the sin is literally against you or not, the implication is that it is a sin which you are personally aware of rather than just hearsay or gossip.

"Go" is an imperative, not an option. It may sometimes be necessary to contact someone by phone or by mail but these are inferior substitutes for a face-to-face discussion. Writing limits the opportunity for clarification, feedback, and immediate resolution, reconciliation, and restoration. Calling someone on the phone is somewhat better but it denies the opportunity to see their reaction. Going to someone directly implies concern and sincerity; it shows that the goal is restoration not retribution, to build someone up not to blast them. Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers that his intention was not "to shame you but to warn you, as my dear children" (I Cor. 4:14).

"Go" obviously does not mean "send." Correction is normally to be carried out by the person most closely involved. "Just between the two of you" implies that under normal circumstances the person who becomes aware of the sin should not contact others to go for them and they should not take others with them on the first visit (exceptions would be when a witness is prudent for ethical, moral or legal reasons).

Sharing the details of a suspected sin with others, even the church leadership, before the facts have been confirmed at the source is gossip. We owe our brothers and sisters the benefit of the doubt. We should go with the hope that there may be another explanation for the facts, or that there may be other facts of which we are unaware. Going directly to the person first (not their boss, pastor, parents, husband or wife) gives them the chance to clear up the situation before it becomes a matter of public knowledge.

We must remember the difference between correction and discipline. Correction simply means to set something right and is an individual responsibility of each person. Correction can, and often does, start at the bottom. Discipline, if it is needed, usually comes from those who are in authority over the person. But to 'begin the process of correcting someone by going to the person in authority over them is to assume that they need discipline when they may only need correction. Or if our information is incorrect, they may not even need that.

Certainly it is proper to seek guidance from the leaders of the church regarding whether the issue at hand is actually sin or not, or regarding the specific steps of the correction procedure. But this should follow one's own search of the Scriptures, and should remain general in nature (no names or identifying details). If clarification or guidance is needed at this point, then one of the pastors or elders should be contacted.

Certainly the matter may ultimately need to be revealed to those in authority over the person (parents, pastor, elders, boss, perhaps even the police) or to others, but it would certainly be better to go to them with a good report of a resolution rather than with a report which must later be retracted.

It must be emphasized that at this point the matter is not an official issue before the church, but is a private issue between two people. They may be members or non-members. The correction may occur within or outside of the church. The person who initiates the correction is not acting as an official representative of the church in any way but is simply trying to resolve an issue between himself and another individual. The church does not become involved in any official sense until the matter reaches step two.

Our goal in going is to "show him his fault," that is, show him that he has sinned. The implication is that this may be a blind spot. "If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." This also implies that we are not going for a debate or an argument. By limiting correction to what can be shown in Scripture to be sin, there is no need for an argument.

It may be helpful to write out a clear statement of the sin and a Scripture reference or references which address this issue. This will help you to clearly articulate the matter and to keep the discussion on an objective and Scriptural level. If the facts are as you thought, and you can show that the action is contrary to Scripture, then correction should occur. Carefully following step one in a humble and prayerful manner should solve 90% of the church correction situations.

If you are at fault as well then you should confess your sin and seek their forgiveness.

If the person admits the sin and agrees to correct it then repentance has occurred. They should also seek the forgiveness of God and others whom they have offended. This resolving of differences is the process of reconciliation. Restitution may also be needed.

You should also express your forgiveness and encourage them. If the problem will take time to correct then you should be willing to pledge your support in helping them to correct the problem. This is what "fellowship" really means: helping someone to bear a burden. At this point the matter has been resolved and reconciliation has begun.

But what if they refuse to change?

#### **C.2.b.ii           STEP 2: RETURN TO THEM WITH WITNESSES**

*"BUT IF HE WILL NOT LISTEN, TAKE ONE OR TWO OTHERS ALONG, SO THAT EVERY MATTER MAY BE ESTABLISHED BY THE TESTIMONY OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES" (MATT. 18:16).*

The goal of returning with witnesses is first of all to confirm the facts by independent witnesses (cf. Proverbs 18:17; I Tim. 5:19). While "witnesses" could be meant to refer to those who actually witnessed the sin, this is unlikely in this context since many times a sin will only be known to one person. Therefore it seems more likely that the intent here is to mean that these persons are going for the purpose of "witnessing" the attempt at correction and the response to the correction. Then if the issue is brought before the elders under step three there would be at least three people to confirm the charge. Going with witnesses also serves to impress upon them the gravity of sin, the unanimity of the church, and the seriousness of the need for correction.

This step falls between the private phase of personal correction and the following steps of public correction in the church. It is the bridge that connects these two steps. It is an opportunity for the person to be corrected while the matter is still mostly private. It is an opportunity for others to check the facts and to determine who, if anyone, is at fault. Perhaps YOU are wrong.

It would be appropriate for these witnesses to be leaders of the church since the next step (if needed) is to take the matter before the church. If the person being corrected is a member of another church then the leadership of that church should be contacted. If the person is not currently a member of any church then any mature Christians may serve as witnesses. If the person is a member of Faith Bible Church then the chairman of the board of elders should be informed at this point and he will refer the matter to the counseling and correction committee for action.

The counseling and correction committee represents an intermediate body between the individual who initiates the correction and the board of elders. It represents an increase of authority over the individual reporting person alone, but an intermediate step before the matter is taken to the elders under step three.

The counseling and correction committee will review the matter and decide upon the action to be taken. They may, in certain cases, decide to assign one member from that committee to repeat step one independently. If they agree to proceed with the matter then two members of that committee will be assigned to act as witnesses.

It will be necessary to brief the members of the committee regarding the nature of the situation, but they are to remain impartial until they have heard both sides of the issue firsthand. It is important to understand that the witnesses are not going just to support the person who has brought the complaint, but rather they are going as unbiased, independent witnesses for the purpose of hearing both sides of the issue and confirming the facts.

During all phases of the correction and discipline process all parties have the opportunity of speaking with the counseling and correction committee, or with the pastors or elders, for the purpose of guidance, clarification or to provide additional information. A copy of the procedures to be followed by the counseling and correction committee, and by the elders, during each phase, including the appeal and arbitration process, will be available from the chairman of the elders or any member of the counseling and correction committee.

Steps one and two may be repeated more than once before proceeding to step three. If the person admits the sin, agrees to correct it and to seek forgiveness, then the matter is resolved and reconciliation has begun. But what if they still won't change?

### **C.2.b.iii            STEP 3: TELL IT TO THE CHURCH**

*"IF HE REFUSES TO LISTEN TO THEM, TELL IT TO THE CHURCH"        (MATTHEW 18:17).*

This situation has now crossed over from being a private matter to being a matter of possible concern to the membership of the local church.

If the matter has not been resolved the counseling and correction committee will refer the matter to the elder board for consideration.

The elders of the church will now consider the presentation of the matter to the church membership. If the elders agree to proceed with the matter, then the offending member will be removed from any church ministry which he is performing until restoration is complete.

Informing the church body of the nature of the situation serves several purposes. It is designed to humble, not humiliate. As the person responds in humility, God gives them grace to be able to turn from their sin:

*" ... God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (James 4:6-10; ct. also 1 Peter 5:7).*

Likewise, this step is designed not just to expose the sinner but to exhort the saints to pray, and to encourage the sinner to repent. If everyone is aligned against the sin, the sinner just might get the idea that he is indeed wrong and that this is not merely a matter of personal difference with the person who originally came to him.

This will also serve as a warning to others who may be involved in, or contemplating becoming involved in a similar situation. The result may be that more than one person is corrected. Details regarding the actual announcement to the church are contained in the policy manual.

If repentance and reconciliation occur then this will be reported to the congregation and the elders will consider how and when to restore the member to ministry. Whereas reconciliation is the process of bringing two people back into agreement by resolving their differences, restoration is the process of putting something back into its previous condition. Restoration is necessary since the matter was reported to the church.

And if he still won't repent?

#### **C.2.b.iv STEP 4: REMOVE HIM FROM MEMBERSHIP AND FELLOWSHIP**

*"AND IF HE REFUSES TO LISTEN EVEN TO THE CHURCH, TREAT HIM AS YOU WOULD A PAGAN OR A TAX COLLECTOR" (Matthew 18:17).*

Much misunderstanding, confusion and controversy have resulted from attempts to interpret and apply this instruction. But the key to understanding what Jesus meant by these words is to ask how Jesus applied them Himself.

The way in which Jesus dealt with pagans and tax collectors was to treat them as unbelievers who needed the gospel. He still met with them (cf. Matt. 9:9-13). He was still concerned for them. He reasoned with them and he prayed for them. But they were not part of the circle of His disciples (which later became the church).

In modern terms, this means that the person could be removed from membership in the local church. If his continued presence was distractive, disruptive or divisive then he could be asked to leave. The primary goal here is not to punish the sinner (which is God's prerogative) but rather to preserve the peace and purity of the church. This action would be taken by the leadership of the church but the effect would be felt by the entire church.

This does not mean excommunication, shunning or banning. It does not mean total disassociation, but rather association on a different level and with a different goal in mind. Consider Paul's instruction to the Thessalonian church:

*"If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, 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" (II Thess. 3:14-15).*

"Associate" means "to mix together or mingle" and refers to companionship, fellowship, or joining together with. Paul is not prohibiting simple communication however as evidenced by the fact that we are to continue to "warn" the brother. "Warn" is translated at other places in the New Testament as "teach," or "instruct." To warn, teach or instruct implies at least some level of communication. While Jesus frequently communicated with unbelievers, He did not join together with them.

But Paul does prohibit close association with persistent sinners:

*... With such a man do not even eat ... Expel the wicked man from among you" (I Cor. 5:9-13).*

These are strong words but Paul is talking about strong medicine here. But it is still medicine which is intended to cure the patient, not poison him. Paul's goal, and our goal, must always be restoration:

*"... hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord" (I Cor. 5:5).*

God is concerned about the purity of His church. Disruptive, distracting and divisive elements must be removed or the integrity of the church will be compromised (cf. I Cor. 5:1-13). Remember that once the correction process reaches this point, the issue is pride, not just the original offence. Only pride would keep a person unrepentant in the face of Scripture and the church. For this reason Paul commands:

*"Warn a divisive person once, and then a second time. After that have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned" (Titus 3: 10-11).*

If repentance and reconciliation occur then the elders will announce to the congregation that the person is to be restored to membership and fellowship as well. The elders will also consider how and when to return the member to ministry.

## D REPENTANCE, RECONCILIATION AND RESTORATION

It is our goal and intention that at an early point in this process the person would acknowledge his sin and turn away from it (repentance), and seek forgiveness from God and from anyone who may have been harmed by the sin (reconciliation). God has promised to forgive those who confess their sins (I John 1:8-10) and so should we.

Throughout the entire process we have been responsible to lift up the person in prayer to God asking that God would lead them to repentance. We have been responsible to forgive them, to be willing to be reconciled to them, and to be willing to help them to bear their burden as they work to correct the problem. Finally, when repentance and reconciliation have occurred, we are responsible to make every effort to restore our relationship and fellowship.

Our goal has not been to judge, for that is God's prerogative:

*"(Jesus) is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead"  
(Acts 10:42; also cf. James 4:12).*

Our job has only been to inform the person of God's judgement on the matter as presented in Scripture.

Our goal has not been to punish, for that is God's prerogative as well:

*"Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head'. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:19-21).*

Our job has only been to reveal to the person what God has indicated that His punishment for sin will be, and to take steps to maintain the peace and purity of the church. And while we might like to be able to pardon the sinner from all of the consequences of his sin that too is God's prerogative:

*"Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon" (Isaiah 55:7).*

Our job is to urge the person to turn from their sin (repent) and to seek God's forgiveness and pardon. God's promise of *eternal* forgiveness and pardon is clear (cf. Rom. 8:1). In addition, God may also pardon the sinner from the consequences of his sin *in this world*. But then again, God may allow the temporal consequences to stand (cf. II Sam. 12:13-14 as an example of a situation where God's forgiveness of sin is given but His pardon of the temporal consequences is not). If the consequences must be endured then we have God's promise that it will ultimately work out for their good (Romans 8:28). We should pray for the person that God in His infinite wisdom and mercy would pardon him according to His will (II Tim. 4:16).

Our job is also to forgive the person. Immediately following Christ's discussion of correction in Matthew 18:15-20 comes His discussion of forgiveness (Matt.18:21-35). This type of forgiveness does not wait until they "deserve it."

*"You have heard that it was said, 'love your neighbor and hate your enemies'. But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven ... if you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?" (Matt. 5:43-46).*

If we wait until someone deserves to be forgiven before we forgive them then we don't really love them. We would be waiting until we think that they have suffered enough. We would be trying to enact God's judgement and punishment for Him. That's His right. Praise God that He didn't wait until we deserved it before He forgave us! (cf. Rom. 5:8).

Our job is just to let it go. "Forgive" does not mean to "let them off" or let them go free, in the sense of letting them avoid punishment. Remember, punishment is God's job. In addition to forgiving them we may also be able to pardon them from the consequences of their sin which are under our control. But some consequences may need to be endured: debts may need to be repaid, and contracts, obligations and commitments fulfilled. Restitution may be required.

The word for "forgive" occurs 25 times in the New Testament. It is translated by such words as "lay aside, omit, yield up, remit, put away, send forth, let alone, let be, let go, and let have." In accounting terms it would mean to clear our mental account and no longer show this offence as a "debit." We are to rub it out not rub it in. It is clear that the idea just means to let it go and let God do His will.

But forgiving does not necessarily mean forgetting. Part of wisdom is to learn from our experiences. Someone who repeatedly violates the terms of a contract but asks for forgiveness must still be forgiven. But wisdom might indicate that we should not enter into the same type of contract again without including safeguards. Otherwise we might be tempting them beyond their ability to resist. Forgiving does not require forgetting. But forgiving does mean that we are not to continue bringing it up, to keep reminding them of it in a harmful way, or to use it as a weapon to destroy them.

While we are to forgive immediately, reconciliation is dependent upon repentance. Once the person has acknowledged his sin and sought forgiveness from God and those whom he has offended, then he is reconciled with both God and the church.

If he reached the step of being removed from the membership and fellowship of the church then he must be restored as well. This is effected by the elders after they have received satisfactory evidence of the sinner's repentance from his sin, and his desire to be restored to the church. The elders will then announce to the church that repentance and reconciliation have occurred and he is now to be restored to membership and fellowship. The elders will also consider when and how he can be returned to ministry.

Suffering is a normal part of the Christian life (II Tim. 3:12; Phil. 1:29). Offenses will occur. As someone has said, "motion causes friction." A dynamic church will produce problems, and people will sin and fail. Some will be hurt. But rather than being easily offended we should be quick to forgive and faithful to correct. Joseph had this attitude when he finally confronted his brothers who had sold him into slavery. Rather than holding bitterness against them he told them; "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good ..." (Gen. 45:48 and 50:19-20). We should try to keep the broader perspective that "... in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). Problems are some of the tools which God uses to shape our lives.

We may never see the conclusion of some matters. Some people will admit their sin and turn from it seeking forgiveness and reconciliation. Those we have "won" (Matt. 18:15). We are to comfort them and reaffirm our love to them (II Cor. 2:7-8). But some will refuse to listen (cf. Jer. 6:10 and Matt. 18:16-17). These we are to pray for and to continue to seek their restoration (II Thess. 3:15). But if we follow through with these steps, in love, then we have fulfilled our responsibility to them before God (Acts 20:26-27).

## **E "EXAMINE THYSELF"**

The correction process must begin with a look at ourselves.

*"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye', when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matt. 7:1-5).*

For correction to be fruitful, and for it to be praiseworthy before God, it must be done with the right motives and with the right attitude. Several of the passages regarding correction also contain qualifiers describing the attendant attitude. Some of those have been summarized into the following "checklist" in order for you to check yourself.

1. Am I sure of the specific scriptural principal which has been violated? (Matt. 18:15).
2. Have I prayed concerning this matter? (James 5:16).
3. Is the evidence first-hand or reliable? (1 Tim. 5:19).
4. Have I forgiven them? (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13; Matt. 6:12).
5. Am I sure that there are no "planks" in my own eyes which are distorting my vision or perspective? (Matt. 7:3-5).
6. Am I prejudiced or biased? (I Tim. 5:21).
7. Am I helping them to become "perfect in Christ?" (Col. 1:28).
8. Am I tearing down or building up? (I Thess. 5:11; Eph. 4:29).
9. Am I seeking to encourage rather than to embarrass? (I Cor. 4:14).
10. Am I correcting as a brother, not an enemy? (II Thess. 3:15).
11. Am I doing this with deep love and concern? (Acts 20:31).
  - a. With kindness? (II Tim. 2:24-25). With gentleness? (Gal. 6:1).
  - b. With compassion (Eph. 4:32).
12. Am I "filled with knowledge and full of goodness?" (Rom. 15:14; cf. Co1. 3:16).
13. Am I consistent and persistent without being rude or obnoxious? (Acts 20:31).
14. Am I committed to helping to "bear their burden" as they work to correct the problem: (Gal. 6:2)?

In the long run, why we correct is more important than how we correct. Correction is to come from a desire to uphold God's honor, not a desire to get even with someone. It is a desire to encourage and improve someone's life, not a desire to get back at them. It is a desire to help them grow, not a desire to get ahead ourselves.

In other words, correction is the desire to help someone to do what is right out of justice, compassion and humility. It is motivated by love and supported by prayer. It is our job. May God give us the grace to do it well for His glory.

*"No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11).*

## NOTES

1 This general description of what constitutes "sin" for the purposes of church correction and discipline was drawn from the more complete description in Ted G. Kitchens, "Perimeters of Corrective Church Discipline," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (April-June 1991): 201-213.

2 This summary was adapted from Dr. Dick Mayhue, "Church Restoration a.k.a. Church Discipline)," *Church Restoration*; p. 344.

3 Kitchens, p.213.

Adapted and expanded from a chart in Mayhue, p.350.

These articles and others are on reserve in the church library.