

Church Discipline and Restoration

Purpose

Church discipline is meant to restore an erring Christian, to purify the church, to deter sin in the congregation, and to demonstrate the reality of righteous living to the unsaved world (1 Corinthians 5:6-8). It is not meant to apply to gray areas of personal disagreement or for differences of interpretation in non-essential points of theology.

Application

Church discipline will only be applied to those who are within our community of faith—those who regularly worship with us and participate in fellowship with the body. Because they are accountable for the spiritual well-being of the flock (Hebrews 13:17), the Elders will determine whether the sin warrants church discipline. No public steps (see “Procedure” below) will be taken unless the Elders agree that it has become necessary. Discipline applies to all equally, as needed, including Ministers, Elders, Deacons, and Officers. Most importantly, its application is governed by Scripture, as referenced in the following sample texts (Matthew 18:12-14; Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-14).

Attitude

The heart attitude of the church in discerning and dealing with erring believers through the means of church discipline must demonstrate the following:

- Proceed with humility (James 4:10).
- Act and speak with the fullness of grace and truth (John 1:14; Romans 8:29).
- Avoid both vengeance and arrogance, and display an attitude of gentleness (Galatians 6:1).
- View the individual as an erring brother and not a bitter enemy (2 Thessalonians 3:15).
- Approach them with sorrow and not sarcasm (1 Corinthians 5:2; 2 Corinthians 2:4).
- Be ready to forgive them when repentance occurs (2 Corinthians 2:7; 7:10-11).

Examples

The following is not meant to be an exhaustive list, nor does an isolated incident necessarily require discipline. The key issue is not what the believer has done (since all struggle with sin), but his unwillingness to repent and bring his will and life into subjection to the Word of God, even after godly counsel has been provided.

Christians who sin and repent are not subjected to the steps outlined below, as grace is offered to all who seek restoration with God and their brothers/sisters. However, those who will not turn from their sin after the steps below are followed must be excluded from fellowship with the body, according to Scripture.

The following are some examples of sin that may result in church discipline:

- Sins of the flesh, such as sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, drunkenness, or swindling (1 Corinthians 5:11).

- Denial of the great doctrines of the faith (1 Timothy 6:3,5; 2 Timothy 2:16-18; Titus 3:10; 2 John 1:10-11; Revelation 2:14).
- Pursuing an unbiblical divorce (Matthew 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:15).
- Divisiveness (2 Thessalonians 3:11; Titus 3:10-11; Romans 16:17-20).
- Unruly, disorderly and undisciplined living (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 11, 14; 1 Thessalonians 5:14).
- Conflict between Christians (1 Corinthians 6:5; Philippians 4:2-3; Matthew 18:15-18).

Procedure

Church discipline is to be handled prayerfully, carefully, and justly, with individual attempts of corrective or preventative action as follows:

1. Awareness of those who are in need of biblical correction (Romans 16:17; 2 Thessalonians 3:14). This is not the result of intentionally looking for sin, but from living in close community and fellowship with one another.
2. Arrange a private meeting with the offender (Matthew 18:15). Confront him about his sin and if he repents, forgive him (Luke 17:3).
3. If there is no repentance, set up a second meeting with 1 or 2 others present (Matthew 18:16). During these private and semi-private meetings, the individual should be repeatedly admonished (Titus 3:10), rebuked (2 Timothy 4:2), and warned (1 Thessalonians 5:14) about his sin and unwillingness to repent.
4. If there is no repentance, bring the matter before the Elders (if not already aware). Do not seek to gossip or inform others, unnecessarily.
5. The Elders will seek to restore the offender by investigating the facts, meeting with the individual, and urging them to repent if

the circumstances indicate sin has occurred and repentance is warranted.

6. If the individual does not repent, or will not meet with the Elders, a private letter is sent from the Elders to warn the offender about his sin and the consequences of refusing to repent.
7. If there is still no repentance the church body may be notified publicly by the Elders of the sin (e.g. announced at the end of a service, in a called meeting, or via a public letter to the one(s) involved). The church then seeks to encourage the person toward repentance (Matthew 18:17; 1 Timothy 5:20).
8. If the erring brother refuses to heed the warning and correction of the Elders and the Church, he shall be dismissed from the church, removed from the membership rolls, denied Christian fellowship, service and communion, and delivered over to Satan* (see below) with the hope and prayer of repentance and reconciliation. See below for Scriptural guidance.

Examples where Christian fellowship is withdrawn:

- those who cause divisions in the body – “avoid them” (Romans 16:17)
- divisive persons – “reject,” “have nothing more to do with” (Titus 3:10)
- those who are disorderly, idle, irresponsible – “keep away,” “have no company with” (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14)
- false and divisive teachers – “from such withdraw thyself” (1 Timothy 6:3, 5, KJV) or “avoid such people” (2 Timothy 3:5, ESV)
- sexually immoral, greedy, idolater, slanderer, drunkard, swindler – “not even to eat with such a person” (1 Corinthians 5:11)

*He is “delivered over to Satan” in the circumstances described in 1 Corinthians 5:5 and 1 Timothy 1:20. This means that the person is removed from the protective care of God’s Holy Spirit ministering in and through God’s people in the local church. While drastic, the point of such a harsh step is actually one of compassion—to rouse them from their unrepentant state, that they might be restored to fellowship with the Lord and his body (“so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”)

Restoration

If a person who has been disciplined repents at any point, the church shall warmly and lovingly restore him to fellowship within the body (see Matthew 18:13; Luke 15:11-32). Once the Elders are persuaded that the person has sincerely repented and sought forgiveness from God and the person or persons he offended, they shall announce his restoration. That announcement shall be accompanied by a solemn admonition to the congregation that the restored person's offenses have been forgiven and are not to be held against him or otherwise hinder his fellowship within the church (see 2 Corinthians 2:5-11). When deemed appropriate by the Elders, however, the restored person may be restricted from certain responsibilities within the church until he has demonstrated the requisite qualities for those responsibilities (see, e.g., 1 Timothy 3:2, 8; Titus 1:6).