

SUBJECT: Church Discipline

Responsibility: Members, Pastor, Elders

Policy

The purpose of church discipline is the spiritual restoration of fallen members and the consequent strengthening of the church and glorifying of the Lord. When a sinning believer is rebuked and he turns from his sin and is forgiven, he is won back to fellowship with the body and with its head, Jesus Christ.

The goal of church discipline, then, is not to throw people out of the church or to feed the self-righteous pride of those who administer the discipline. It is not to embarrass people or to exercise authority and power in some unbiblical manner. The purpose is to restore a sinning believer to holiness and bring him back into a pure relationship within the assembly.

Church discipline is the exercise of that authority that the Lord Jesus Christ has committed to the church for the preservation of its purity, peace, and good order. All members of the church are under the care of and subject to the discipline of the church. The ultimate goal of all discipline is to train Christians to be self-disciplined so that they may share in the holiness of God (see Heb. 12:7-13).

Discipline is concerned with the prevention and correction of offenses, an offense being defined as anything in the doctrine or practice of a member of the church that is contrary to the Word of God. The purpose of church discipline is: (1) to guard and preserve the honor of God (see Rom. 2:24; 1 Cor. 10:31); (2) to protect the purity of the church and to guard other Christians from being tempted, misled, divided, or otherwise harmed (see 1 Cor. 5:6); and (3) to restore fallen Christians to usefulness to God and fellowship with his church (see Matt. 18:12-14; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; 7:8-10; Gal. 6:1-2).

In Matthew 18:15, Jesus says, "And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother." The Greek word translated "won" was originally used of accumulating wealth in the sense of monetary commodities. Here it refers to the gaining back of something of value that is lost, namely, an erring brother. When a brother or sister strays, a valuable treasure is lost, and the church should not be content until he or she is restored. The body of Christ is in the business of recovery (Gal. 6:1), and such is the purpose of church discipline.

Just as a good shepherd will go after a sheep that has wandered from the flock (Matt. 18:12-14; Ezek. 34:4,8,16), so shall the elders and members of this church seek to restore a wandering member to the Lord through biblical discipline. Therefore, discipline may be instituted or continued either before or after a member seeks to withdraw from membership if the Board of Elders determines that such discipline may serve to guard and preserve the honor of God, protect the purity of the church, or restore the wandering member to the Lord. While the church cannot

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force a withdrawing person to remain in this congregation, the church has the right and the responsibility to encourage restoration, to bring the disciplinary process to an orderly conclusion, and to make a final determination as to the person's membership status at the time withdrawal is sought or acknowledged. In doing so, the Board of Elders, at its discretion, may temporarily suspend further disciplinary proceedings, dismiss any or all charges pending against the accused, or proceed with discipline and pronounce a judgment.

If unusual circumstances require it, the Board of Elders may deny a person under church discipline the right of participating in the Lord's Supper, or of performing the functions of his office, until the issue is concluded.

Process

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus sets forth the four-step process of church discipline: (1) tell him his sin alone; (2) take some witnesses; (3) tell the church; and (4) treat him as an outsider.

Step One (Matt. 18:15). The process of church discipline begins on an individual level. Jesus said, "And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private" (v. 15a). Here, an individual believer is to go to a sinning brother privately and confront him in a spirit of humility and gentleness. This confrontation involves clearly exposing his sin so that he is aware of it and calling him to repentance. If the sinning brother repents in response to the private confrontation, that brother is forgiven and restored (v. 15b).

Step Two (Matt. 18:16). If the sinning brother refuses to listen to the one who has rebuked him privately, the next step in the discipline process is to take one or two more believers along to confront him again (v. 16a). The purpose of taking other believers is so that "by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed" (v. 16b). In other words, the witnesses are present not only to confirm that the sin was committed but, in addition, to confirm that the sinning brother was properly rebuked and that he has or has not repented. The witnesses need to confirm whether there is a heart of repentance or one of indifference or rejection. Such a report provides the basis for further action because the situation has been verified beyond the report of one individual.

At this point, it should be hoped that the one or two who are brought along to confront the sinner will not have to become public witnesses against him before the rest of the church. Ideally, their added rebuke will be sufficient to induce a change of heart in the offending brother that the initial rebuke did not cause. If this change of heart does occur, that brother is forgiven and restored, and the matter is dropped.

The follow form of discipline may be pronounced at this stage:

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Suspension is a form of discipline by which one is deprived of the privileges of membership in the church (i.e. holding an office in ministry, membership in ministry, voting, etc). It may be for a definite or indefinite time. A member of the church, while under suspension, shall be the object of deep solicitude and earnest dealing from the Board of Elders and the church to the end that he may be restored.

Step Three (Matt. 18:17a). If the sinning brother refuses to listen and respond to the confrontation of the witnesses after a period of time, those witnesses are then to tell it to the Church (v. 17a). This is most appropriately done by bringing the matter to the attention of the elders, who in turn oversee its communication to the assembly as a whole.

The elders avoid carrying out the third or fourth stage of church discipline until they are absolutely certain that the erring believer has truly sinned, or is continuing to sin, and that he has refused to repent when appropriately confronted. The elders will routinely send a letter by registered mail warning the individual that the third (or fourth) step of discipline will be taken if they have not received word of repentance by a specific date. When this date has passed, the person's sin and refusal to repent are made known publicly, either before the entire assembly during a Church Family Meeting, a special meeting, or by letter.

Upon enacting this third step, the congregation is encouraged to confront the person and plead with him to repent before the fourth step becomes necessary. That crucial and potent procedure often draws the sinner to repentance and obedience. If repentance does take place, the sinning believer is forgiven and restored.

The following form of discipline may be pronounced at this stage:

Deposition is more severe than suspension. It consists of a solemn declaration by Board of Elders that the offender is no longer a member of Mt. Zion.

Step Four (Matt. 18:17b). The fourth and final step in the process of church discipline is excommunication. Excommunication means to "put out of fellowship" or "disfellowship". If a sinning believer refuses to listen even to the church, he is to be ostracized from the fellowship. Jesus said, "Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer" (v. 17b). Jesus' use of these terms doesn't mean that the church is to treat these people badly. It simply means that when a professing believer refuses to repent, the church is to treat him as if he were outside of the fellowship. They are not to let him associate and participate in the blessings and benefits of the Christian assembly.

The one who is persistently unrepentant is to be totally ostracized from the fellowship of the church and treated like an outcast, not a brother. As far as the welfare of the church is concerned, the purpose of putting the brother out is to protect the purity of the fellowship (1 Cor. 5:6), to warn the assembly of the seriousness of sin (1 Tim. 5:20), and to give a testimony of righteousness to a watching world. But as far as the welfare of the brother himself is concerned, the purpose of the ostracism is not to punish but to awaken, and it must therefore be done in humble love and never in a spirit of self-righteous superiority (2 Thess. 3:15).

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When a church has done everything it can to bring a sinning member back to purity of life but is unsuccessful, that individual is to be left to his sin and his shame. If he is truly a Christian, God will not cast him away, but He may allow him to sink still deeper before he becomes desperate enough to turn from his sin.

The command not to have fellowship or even social contact with the unrepentant brother does not exclude all contact. When there is an opportunity to admonish him and try to call him back, the opportunity should be taken. In fact, such opportunities should be sought. But the contact should be for the purpose of admonishment and restoration and no other.

If the person under discipline leaves the church during the disciplinary process or while a discipline is still in effect, and if the Board of Elders learns that he is attending another church, the Board of Elders may inform that church that the person is currently under church discipline and may ask that church to encourage the accused to repent of his sin and to be restored to the Lord and to any people whom he has offended. Such communications enhance the possibility that a person may finally repent of his sin, and, at the same time, serve to warn the other church to be on guard against the harm that the accused might do to their members (see Matt. 18:12-14; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Thess. 3:6-14; 2 Tim. 1:15; 2:16-18; 4:9, 14-15; 3 John 9-10).

If a person who has been disciplined through suspension, deposition, or excommunication comes to repentance, the church shall warmly and lovingly restore him to fellowship within the body (see Matt. 18:13; Luke 15:11-32). Once the Board of Elders is persuaded that the person has sincerely confessed his wrongs and sought forgiveness from God and the person or persons he offended, it 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 Cor. 2:5-11). When deemed appropriate by the Board of 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 Tim. 3:2, 8; Titus 1:6).