

Cross Walk Church
Position Statement: Church Discipline

One of the wonderful benefits of being a member of a biblically based local church is being disciplined by those who love you. Too many Christians are offended by the thought of church discipline and too many churches are afraid of offending erring Christians so they avoid church discipline altogether. If a church is to be biblical, church discipline must become an integral part of the ministry.

While the primary passage on church discipline is found in Matthew 18, other passages speak to the issues of discipline and restoration. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul commanded the church to immediately excommunicate a member who was actively practicing immoral behavior. In 2 Corinthians 2, Paul exhorts the church to receive back into fellowship one who had been disciplined by the members. Also, in Galatians 6:1-2 the local church was instructed on whose responsibility it is to restore a fellow Christian who is overtaken in any sin. The Bible not only tells us about church discipline, but also tells us how it is to be carried out.

Jesus instituted the practice of church discipline following his parable of the lost sheep in Matthew 18:1-14. The message of this parable is the dedication of the man in the restoration of his sheep which has strayed away from his flock. As with all New Testament references to sheep, it refers to Christians. In particular, this straying sheep was a part (member) of a particular flock under the watchful care of a particular shepherd. There is no reference to this sheep being a part of “all sheep universally” nor is this a reference to just any shepherd searching for the lost sheep. This sheep and this man were intimately connected in their relationship. It would be correct to say that this man (shepherd) went to look for a lost sheep from his local flock.

When Jesus begins his short discourse on church discipline in verses 15-20, he broadens the parable to include any Christian who has sinned against another Christian. The principle of church discipline is not bound to a centralized geography nor is it confined to a particular class of Christians. This parable is universal but is to be applied locally wherever brothers and sisters in Christ happen to be. The only way in which Jesus’ teaching can be applied is through the local church membership.

There are six steps which define the full extent of church discipline. These steps can stop at any time when the one who has sinned confesses, repents and forsakes the sin. Not only can the steps of church discipline be stopped when one repents, serious sins can skip directly to the final stages of church discipline where the whole membership calls the sinner to repent. Some sins are so grievous, that the member is immediately dismissed from the membership and treated as an unbeliever. However, most church discipline will follow the steps outlined by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20.

Step 1 – One on one

Jesus described the steps of discipline very clearly for our benefit. According to verse 15, the very first step of church discipline is for the offended brother or sister to go one on one to the offender. The circle must not be enlarged beyond this point until this step is exhausted. By going one on one, Jesus means that the offended goes to the offender until he or she does one of at least three things: 1) explains the situation so that both come to the understanding that nothing was done sinfully, 2) the offender repents or 3) the offender completely rejects the loving confrontation of the offended one.

Step 2 - One or two witnesses investigate the allegation

Verse 16 states that in the case where the offender remains in his or her sin, then church discipline moves to step two: the offended one is obligated by scripture to take one or two witness along in another attempt to reconcile the situation. The witnesses must make a thorough investigation of the situation.

Step 3 - The witnesses confront the erring member

If the offender is found guilty, then it is the responsibility of the witnesses to confront the offender, calling him or her to repent and confess the sin so that the offender and the offended are reconciled (verse 17a).

Step 4 - The witnesses report their findings to the church members

In the event that the offender is found guilty by the witnesses, is confronted and still remains unmoved to confess and reconcile the broken relationship, then the witnesses must move to step four, bringing the matter to the church membership (verse 17b). These witnesses must report the facts of their investigation to the membership.

Step 5 - The church members call the offender to repent

Once the facts have been reported, step five begins as the members of the local church contact the unrepentant offender and express their concern that a lack of repentance places him or her in a dangerous place spiritually. The loving church members must urge the unrepentant offender to humble himself or herself before the Lord and confess the original sin to God and to the one offended so that God is glorified and the broken relationship restored (verse 17c).

Step 6 - The offender is excommunicated and evangelized

A refusal to listen to the church will result in step six; the formal excommunication of the unrepentant sinner from the membership (verse 18). This final step, as well as every step in the church discipline process, must be taken prayerfully and humbly. There is no room for pride, vengeance, or judgmental attitudes. When this final step is taken as a result of the offender's stiff-necked and hard-hearted attitude toward his or her sin, the elders must officially remove the unrepentant offender from the membership. This final step is such a serious one. Jesus states in verses 19-20 that He is in the midst of the process. He also states that God the Father validates the excommunication of the unrepentant offender who is now, by an act of willful rebellion against his or her God-given leaders, declared to have been a false sheep (a fake Christian).

At this point, every church member must treat the excommunicated person as an unbeliever in need of being saved by the grace of God. It is the biblical mandate that no Christian must act as if the disciplined person is still in good standing with the membership. In other words, EVERY member is obligated before God to evangelize this lost soul. Only repentance which leads to or is evidence of salvation can restore the disciplined person back to fellowship in the family of God.

Church discipline must continue only when the offender is found guilty and remains in a state of unrepentance. Once the offender is found guilty and acknowledges that guilt, leading to genuine repentance, church discipline ceases, resulting in forgiveness and restoration.