

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

What is church discipline? Church discipline is a process clearly described by Matthew 18:15-20 that describes a progression from personal/private confrontation/rebuke to a small group confrontation/rebuke to a level of church awareness of the unrepentant state of huge church member. The process ends either with repentance or the eventual expulsion of the unrepentant individual outside of the church.

What are the goals of church discipline? The goals of church discipline are:

- 1) Restore the relationship between a Christian in sin and Christ (Galatians 6:1).
- 2) Restore the relationship between a Christian in sin with other believers and their church in a spirit of love (2 Corinthians 2:5-11).
- 3) Rebuke and expel an unrepentant church member for the sake of their salvation (1 Corinthians 5:3-5).
- 4) Rebuke and expel an unrepentant church member for the protection of the flock (1 Corinthians 5:2, Matthew 18:17, 1 Corinthians 5:6).
- 5) Rebuke and expel an unrepentant church member as a warning for church members (1 Timothy 5:20).

Why is church discipline so important? Church discipline is so important because Satan is constantly attacking the love, forgiveness, and unity of the church (2 Corinthians 2:11). Satan also uniquely attacks and seeks to divide and misdirect the church through false teachers (2 Peter 2, 3:17-18). Public punishment and discipline is difficult, but necessary for obedience to the Lord in His plan for the shepherding of His children (2 Corinthians 2:6). When repentance occurs, loving forgiveness and restoration is a beautiful picture of God's mercy and grace. Churches are warned of the danger of not confronting sin and unrepentant believers within their churches (Revelation 2:20-25).

How is church discipline to be done? Church discipline is designed to be done with truth-filled conviction but also grace-filled gentleness (Galatians 6:1). In that process Christians are also reminded to be watching their own attitudes and thoughts to prevent themselves from also falling into temptation (Galatians 6:1).

What do these stages of discipline look like today? The stages should always be done one on one first, secondarily through the inclusion of a pastor or church leader, thirdly through the church leadership as a whole before the issue being carried in front of the church in a godly and orderly manner. In the case of a charge against a pastor, the charges must be verified by two or three witnesses (1 Timothy 5:19).

What is an example of a mutual decision to "part ways"? Paul and Barnabas and Mark in Acts 15:36-41 are an example of a mutual decision to "part ways." Paul and Barnabas had a disagreement over using Mark (Barnabas' cousin, Colossians 4:10) in ministry. Paul's concern was over Mark's faithfulness after Mark had previously abandoned them on a mission trip to Pamphylia and had proved unfaithful to do the work he was called to do (Acts 15:38). Paul replaced Barnabas and Mark with Silas whose faithfulness was attested to by other Christian brothers.

Were Paul and Barnabas and Mark ever restored? Although that we do not see a restoration between Paul and Barnabas, we do see a restoration between Paul and Mark in 2 Timothy 4:11 Paul states "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry." Time in faithful ministry evidenced Mark's restoration to Gospel service alongside Paul and his instruction to the church at Colossae to welcome Mark (Colossians 4:10).

WHAT ARE THE STEPS OF BIBLICAL DISCIPLINE?

How is Matthew 18:15-20 to be conducted? Biblical discipline continues until either true repentance or expulsion from the church results. The spirit to which it is done is a spirit of love and gentleness, with an emphasis on prayer towards God granting repentance (2 Timothy 2:8, 24-26). The intent is not to embarrass or humiliate the offender with a self-righteous attitude. The goal is forgiveness and restoration of unity within the church (2 Timothy 2:10). The church must diligently follow Matthew 18:15-20 to completion with the awareness that Satan seeks to destroy and divide churches (2 Timothy 2:11). A little tolerated sin within the church threatens to spread and corrupt the entire church (1 Corinthians 5:7, Revelation 2:20, Romans 6:17-20).

What sins are to be dealt with according to Matthew 18:15-20? Although no specific list of sins is given, it appears that public sins against the holiness of God, the unity and leadership of the church, and the teachings of the Scriptures are the areas of sins most commonly dealt with by church discipline.

When has true repentance happened? True repentance ends the process of discipline within Matthew 18:15-20 and is the optimal goal. True repentance is not made merely in the fear of consequences, but is clearly heartfelt, sincere, and lasting. True repentance shows an understanding of the particular sins committed, confessing them completely and specifically to those to whom they have been against. True repentance does not make excuses for one's sin, verbally apologizes without qualification, asks for forgiveness, and demonstrates repentance through a changed life (Acts 26:20).

Who does the apology need to be directed towards? The scope of the apology needs to be as wide as the scope of the offense. In simple terms, the offender needs to apologize to as many people as they sinned against. If they sinned against the whole church, the apology should be to the gathered congregation in an orderly and appropriate manner.

What is biblical discipline? Discipline is a form of punishment designed to correct the offender back to a right practice that demonstrates true repentance. Biblical discipline may be implemented "by the majority" (2 Corinthians 2:7) in "the presence of all" (1 Timothy 5:20) and seems to almost always to involve an expulsion from church membership (1 Corinthians 5:1-10).

What if the offending individual is in church leadership? If the offender is in church leadership, but repents, they should be restored but wisdom should be used in regard to the roles of leadership they are within. Even though they may remain within the membership of the church it may be wise for them to take a voluntary or enforced sabbatical from leadership until they demonstrate trustworthiness and "obedience in everything" (2 Timothy 2:9). If the offender is unrepentant, than the process should continue to follow Matthew 18:15-20 towards a public rebuke and expulsion.

What if the individual is ordained as a deacon or pastor? In the case of a charge against a pastor, the charges must be verified by two or three witnesses (1 Timothy 5:19). Pastors and Deacons should be reevaluated to see if they continue to meet their biblical qualifications for their position (1 Timothy 3:1-13, Titus 1:5-9, Acts 6:1-6). If they do not meet these qualifications they do not need to be serving in such a role and should be removed from active service. Furthermore, if they were licensed or ordained as a church affirmation, such an affirmation may need to be suspended or revoked. If the offender is unrepentant, than the process should continue to follow Matthew 18:15-20 towards a public rebuke and expulsion.

When and how does expulsion occur? When an individual demonstrates a persistence in sin (1 Timothy 5:20) they are to be treated as a non-believer (“Gentile and a tax collector,” Matthew 18:17). This punishment and expulsion is also referred to as:

- “rebuke them in the presence of all” (1 Timothy 5:20)
- “removed from among you” (1 Corinthians 5:2)
- “deliver to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 5:5)
- “cleanse out the old leaven” (1 Corinthians 5:7)
- “not to associate with” (1 Corinthians 5:11)
- “purge the evil person from among you” (1 Corinthians 5:13)
- “must be silenced” (Titus 1:11)
- “rebuke them sharply” (Titus 1:13)
- “handed over to Satan” (1 Timothy 1:20)

What happens after an individual is cast out of a church? Part of treating an individual like a “Gentile and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:17) is the understanding that by their unrepentance they have demonstrated their spiritual deadness and lostness. The primary efforts and focus of prayers should be towards the salvation of the individual (Acts 26:18). Their impact and influence of their sinful teachings or practices must be minimized.

What if an individual leaves the church instead of repenting or facing church discipline? Running away from accountability is helpful to neither the individuals involved, the current congregation, or any future congregations involved. Avoiding accountability is a form of unrepentance that should be brought to the attention of the church. It may also be necessary and helpful to warn a future church of the unrepentant church member’s aggrieved condition upon their departure. This warning may occur through the form a formal church letter or a pastor to pastor warning (2 Timothy 4:14-15).

What is an example of a church constitution and by-laws that includes church discipline? Here is an excerpt from our church. A more comprehensive version of church discipline procedures and comments can be found at: peacemaker.net & alliancedefendingfreedom.org.

(1) In cases of differences between members or broken fellowship with the church, reconciliation rather than punishment shall be the objective, which governs the attitude of one toward another. It is our purpose to pursue every reasonable measure to assist any troubled member. The pastor, staff, and deacons are available for counsel and guidance.

(2) Should any unhappy difference arise between members, the aggrieved member shall follow in a tender spirit the rules of Christ given in Matthew 18:15-22, in an effort to settle the difficulty.

(3) Should a member repeatedly become an offense to the church and to its good name by reason of immoral or unchristian conduct, public scandal, persistent breach of our Church Covenant, or undermine the mission of the church, the deacons with the counsel of the pastor, following the Matthew 18:15-22, shall attempt to correct the offense; and if such an effort fails, they shall report the case to the church.

(4) In case of grave difficulty, the church may request the advice of an acceptable council of brethren from churches of like faith and order.

(5) In such cases the church may withdraw church membership by a three-fourths (3/4) majority ballot vote of those members present and voting, but only after notice and hearing and faithful efforts have been made to bring such member to repentance and reconciliation.