

Questions and Answers about
Church Discipline

My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by Him. For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son whom He receives (Heb.12:5-6).

Church discipline is one of the primary means God uses to correct and restore His children when they fall into sin. It is also one way in which He maintains the unity, purity, integrity, and reputation of the church. Through private or public instruction, warning, counsel, or rebuke, and even expulsion from membership, God corrects his disobedient children or removes those who are not truly His. Christ Himself declared the church to be heaven's instrument in carrying out this difficult but necessary function. The purpose of booklet is to define church discipline and explain how the Bible instructs us to address sin in the church. We must not assume, however, that every situation will fall neatly into a single category. Disciplinary matters are often complex. For this reason, the church must carry out discipline with prayer, diligent application of Scripture, and reliance upon the Spirit of God.

- 1. What is church discipline?** Church discipline involves the church's responsibility to care for one another's souls (Matt.18:15; Lk.17:3; Col.3:16; Heb.3:13; 10:24-25). Not only are believers commanded to "take care" of their own souls, but all believers are commanded to care for one another's souls. This is done as we minister the Word to one another through encouragement, exhortation, prayer, and confrontation (Col.3:16). If a believer sins and refuses to repent, he or she is to be pursued with the aim of reclaiming them from their sinful pattern. The goals of church discipline are to reconcile a sinning brother and protect the purity of the church.
- 2. Is church discipline always negative?** No. Though the word "discipline" is often seen today in a negative light, Scripture actually uses the word and the idea behind it very positively. For instance, teaching, preaching, counseling, and personal accountability are all forms of discipline that are essential to Christ's command to "make disciples of all nations (Mt.28:19). These elements of the faith are designed to strengthen the church, much like exercise strengthens the body (1Tim.4:7-8). In fact, even the formal act of church discipline is intended for the good of the church (purity) and of the impenitent believer (conviction of sin, repentance, and restoration).
- 3. How is church discipline carried out?** Jesus clearly delineates four actions that are taken to address sin within the church body (Matt.18:15-20). First, if someone sins against you, you are obligated to go to that person alone. If he has sinned, loving him requires that we offer the opportunity to repent without spreading knowledge of the sin any further. Second, if he refuses to repent, you should go back to him with two or three witness. The witnesses are to seek the person's restoration, but also to confirm that he refuses to repent. Third, if the person remains impenitent (i.e. unrepentant), you should expand the circle of involvement to include the whole church. The church leadership will address the congregation concerning the brother, appealing for their help in calling the brother to repentance. Finally, if the person rejects all efforts of confrontation then that person must be excluded from fellowship/membership with the church.

- 4. Should every sin be addressed in this manner?** All sin should be addressed in some form, but not every sin deserves the fullest extent of church discipline. Not every sin deserves such severe judgment by the church (Prov.19:11; 1Cor.13:4-7; Col.3:12-14). The fact that we are all sinners demands that grace and mercy be the dominant attributes that are operative within the church. We should follow our Father's example by being "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Ps.103:8)."

Demonstrating grace within the church compels us to distinguish between minor faults and serious offenses. Minor faults are attitudes and actions such as rudeness, impatience, grumbling, complaining, negativity, pettiness, boasting, irritability, speaking when inappropriate, and selfishness. We are permitted, and actually encouraged, to overlook most minor faults rather than resorting to discipline (Proverbs 10:12; 19:11; 1 Peter 4:8).

If a minor fault seems serious enough to require private counsel, we should be particularly careful to apply Christ's words about removing the "speck" from our brother's eye while a "plank" is in our own (Matthew 7:1-5). Only if a minor fault is repeated so consistently or in such a disruptive manner that it causes harm to the church should any measure(s) be taken beyond private instruction, warning, and/or rebuke.

- 5. Then what sins may lead to exclusion from fellowship?** While we should strive to demonstrate mercy and grace toward one another, we should never use this as an excuse for tolerating patterns of sin (Rom.6:1-2). In Scripture we can observe three different categories of sin that deserve discipline: (1) sins which *disrupt* the Body; e.g. contentiousness, divisiveness (1Tim.6:3-5; Titus 3:10-11); (2) sin that *damages* the witness of the church (1Cor.5:1-2); and (3) sin that *distorts* the true gospel (1Tim.1:20).

- 6. Who is responsible for carrying out church discipline?** The New Testament almost always pictures disciplinary action being carried out by the church as a whole. Certainly, the leadership is to lead in this difficult action; however, ultimately excluding someone from fellowship is not the act of one or two persons, but an action taken by the whole church (1Cor.5:2,11,13; 2Thess.3:13-15). "Let him who has done this be removed from among you (*plural*)."

- 7. How should I “go to my brother alone?”** (1) Remind yourself that love requires us to pursue our brother’s eternal good (Jn.13:34; Gal.6:1-2; Phil.2:4; 1Jn.3:11; 5:16). This is the proper perspective for overcoming fear of confrontation. (2) Go to your brother in humility (1Pe.5:5-8). Do not go if you have an attitude of condescension or a spirit of criticism. At this point, your first obligation is to take the speck out of your own eye. (3) Choose your words carefully (Eph.4:29). (4) Begin by giving your brother the benefit of the doubt. You are confronting in order to get the facts, to get their side of the story—not to accuse. (5) Give him an opportunity to talk. (6) Continually pray for your brother’s holiness and your own wisdom in the matter.ⁱ
- 8. How do we “tell it to the church?”** This *does not* involve spreading the problem around by word of mouth. The Bible calls this *slander or gossip*, which is deadly to a church fellowship. Instead, when we tell it to the church, the leadership will formally advise the congregation of the problem. This can be done at a business meeting in which the pastor informs the church of the situation. To avoid public slander, as few details as possible are given. The goal is not to have an open discussion about your brother. Instead, our aim is to petition the church to plead with the sinning brother for their repentance.
- 9. How do we “treat him as a Gentile and tax collector?”** After a sufficient period of time to establish unrepentance, the leadership brings a report of the person’s response to the church. If it is repentance, then we celebrate. If it is resistance, then the facts are reviewed and the person is then removed from church membership. The member’s professed faith is deemed no longer credible by their refusal to repent (1Jn.3:9-10). This is not a voting matter.
- 10. Doesn’t church discipline contradict our call to love one another?** First of all, Scripture teaches that “the LORD disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son whom He receives (Heb.12:6; cf.Rev.3:9).” Therefore, no one is exempt from the LORD’s reproof. Secondly, the church is often times His tool of correction. (Matt.18:15-20; Gal.6:1) This means that confrontation over sin with the true good of the sinner in mind is an act of godly love. Christian love is defined by sacrificial service, and refusing to allow your brother to continue in sin is

one of the supreme acts of love. It is not love to tolerate sin.

11. What should my personal relationship to the disciplined person be? Scripture explains this relationship in a few ways. We are to “treat him as a Gentile and tax collector (Mt.18:17),” and “deliver this man to Satan” (1Cor.5:5; cf.1Tim.1:20). We are told “not to associate” with the unrepentant believer, “not even to eat with such a one (1Cor.5:11),” to “keep away” from them (2Thess.3:6),” and to “have nothing to do with him (2Thess.3:14).” The bottom line here is clear enough: church discipline excludes the person from church fellowship, and even close fellowship on a personal level. As part of the corporate church, the individual’s relationship should reflect and support the church’s judgment.

In both the 1 Corinthians and 2 Thessalonians text, Paul describes the relationship, saying not to “associate with” the unrepentant brother. The Greek word means literally “to mix up together”. So our relationship to the sinning brother is to refuse close fellowship. This does not mean, however, that we are to hide from him or give him the cold shoulder if we happen to meet him. Paul says, “Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother (2Thess.3:15).” When believers do encounter the impenitent brother, our responsibility to him is to confront him with his sin.

12. How can this action restore the sinning brother? The aim of church discipline is to secure his repentance. Scripture teaches that an impenitent believer can be brought to repentance in three ways. (1) He may be shamed because his sin has been made public (2Thess.3:14). (2) He may be confronted with the realization that his sin has severed his familial relationship with the church (1Cor.5:11). (3) He may repent due to the personal confrontation of his sin by the church if they should meet (2Thess.3:15).

13. Why can’t the church just be like the world and “forgive and forget?” The church is more willing to forgive than the world is because we understand what true reconciliation looks like. Reconciliation doesn’t occur because we merely try to forget a serious and repeated offense (though forgetting usually never truly happens!). Biblical reconciliation occurs when the

barrier of offense has been removed. That barrier is sin and the way to remove it is through confession, repentance, and forgiveness (Lk.17:3-4). One of the goals of church discipline is to pave the way for reconciliation between the sinning brother and the church. This occurs when the sin has been confessed and repented of, and the church has forgiven the sinning brother.

14. Church discipline seems out-dated. What place does it serve in today's culture? In order to understand the force of Paul's instruction, we must step out of the 21st century and enter the first and second centuries. Today many churches exist in most cities. So if one is removed from church membership in one place, they may just travel to a different church. This was not so in the New Testament era, for there was only one church in Corinth, one in Ephesus, and one in Thessalonica. To be excluded from fellowship meant no worship on the Lord's Day, no communion with His children around the bread and wine, no praying together with brothers and sisters, and no eating in one another's homes with the church. The only fellowship available to the sinning brother was what he could gain from the world. This is why Paul called it being handed over to Satan. The person in question was no longer permitted to be among the children of God, but only those of Satan. This was the most severe punishment. It was expected to "destroy the flesh" and "train not to blaspheme." This is the true force behind church discipline. The sting of church discipline rests in meaningful church membership.

15. How is the sinning brother restored? The only way that an unrepentant believer can be restored is if they repent of the sin for which they were disciplined. When this happens, we will rejoice for we have "gained" our brother (Matt.18:15). Restoring the brother does not end there, however, for Paul explains that the church's responsibility goes beyond merely being joyous. He writes, "you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him (2Cor.2:5-11)." Clearly Paul recognizes that being publicly rebuked for sin can be overwhelming; therefore, the church should not only forgive, but also comfort. Rather than treating the person awkwardly, we should take tangible measures to reaffirm our love for him—not the least of which involves once more including him in fellowship.

Likewise, Scripture teaches that "if anyone is caught in any

transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness (Gal.6:1).” The Greek word translated “restore” is used elsewhere to describe a fisherman mending his nets after they have been torn. It pictures a process of repairing one who has been damaged by their own sin and public censure. The one who has been disciplined will need attention and care to ensure that the pattern of sin is replaced with godly habits. In doing so, the body will commit to restoring their brother.

16. What if this person were in a leadership position—should they be reinstated? No one is exempt from discipline. Paul instructed Timothy that an elder who persisted in sin should be rebuked in the presence of all (1Tim.5:19-20). Though the qualifications for church leadership certainly aren’t exceptional (most are required of every believer), they do reflect the responsibility of pastoral example (cf. 1Tim.3:1-7; 4:12, 15; Titus 2:7; 1Pe.5:3). For instance, when an elder is publically rebuked, it should serve as an example for the church. Paul writes, “As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, *so that the rest may stand in fear* (1Tim.5:20).” Depending upon the nature of the offense, a restored member will not be immediately (if ever) qualified for biblical offices within the church (i.e., elder or deacon) due to an obvious weakness in a particular area (1 Timothy 3:2-13; Titus 1:6-9; 1 Peter 5:3) and the need for restoring the trust of the church body.

17. What if that person refuses to repent? The person “who bears the name of brother,” yet remains unrepentant cannot be allowed back into church fellowship. To do so would derail Christ’s intention for His church. (Eph.5:25-27). Such a person may “be saved in the day of the Lord (1Cor.5:5), but he will certainly carry that sin with him to the judgment seat of Christ.

18. Could someone possibly sue the church over being disciplined? While this is rare, the church should be prepared for such a reaction. In order to do so, two safeguards must be in place: (1) It is necessary to ensure that members are fully aware of the church’s disciplinary procedures, and have consented to church policy. This can be done through preaching, teaching, and providing relevant literature. It should also be discussed as part of any church membership class. (2) The church should

ensure that this policy is clearly outlined in the church constitution, which is made available to all members.ⁱⁱ

19. What happens to the sinning brother when we fail to exercise church discipline? We contribute to his own self-deception and spiritual demise. The Scriptures teach that “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us...If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us (1Jn.1:8-10).” When the church fails to properly address a sinning brother, we give false assurance to someone who has good reason to question his own salvation. What’s more, by tolerating sin we only cultivate, nurture, and encourage more sin in his life. It is not love to tolerate sin.

20. What happens to the church when we fail to exercise church discipline? A church that fails to exercise church discipline has become complacent with sin. This complacency is usually masked by statements such as, “That’s his problem, not mine,” or “its better not to get involved.” Such thinking is more concerned with self than the glory of God. Furthermore, it fails to take seriously what God has clearly said in His Word about the terrible damage sin does to the very one committing it. When gross sin is not addressed in the church, it will eventually poison the fellowship and stunt spiritual growth, and it makes the church complicit in the ruin of the sinner. It distorts the gospel and damages the witness of the church. Moreover, the result of harboring unresolved sin in the church is that the church becomes offensive to her Lord. In Jesus’ words, that church has become “lukewarm.” “Because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold [i.e. you have become indifferent], I will spit you out of My mouth... (Rev.3:16).” In such a case, the whole church must be disciplined by Christ: “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me (Rev.3:19-20).” This verse is given in the context of Christ speaking to just such a church – it is addressed, not to individuals, but to an entire church body. The church that becomes indifferent to sin breaks fellowship with Christ, which is a condition He will not allow to go unpunished.

ⁱ The material in question 7 has been adapted from Mark Lauterbach, *The Transforming Community: the practice of the gospel in church discipline* (Carol Stream, IL: Reformation & Revival Ministries, 2003) 105-109.

ⁱⁱ Sande, Ken. "Keeping the lawyers at bay." *ChristianityToday.com* 27 July 2005 < <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/august/17.34.html> >

Other good resources on this and related topics:

Mark Dever. *What is a Healthy Church?* Wheaton: Crossway, 2007

Thabiti Anyabwile. *What is a Healthy Church Member?* Wheaton: Crossway, 2008

Joshua Harris. *Stop Dating the Church.* Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004.

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