



CHURCH DISCIPLINE

INTRODUCTION TO CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Church discipline is one of the most controversial and misunderstood aspects of life in a local church. As a result, this process – which God designed to help mature and protect the church – has often been the source of division and mistrust.

Understanding the purpose of church discipline requires understanding the purpose of the church. Ephesians 3:10-11 tells us that God established His church to reflect His character, wisdom, and glory in the midst of a fallen world. He has intended from the beginning of time to present the church as a gift to His Son, Jesus, which is why we often refer to the church as the bride of Christ. To prepare her for the eternity that awaits, the Father, the Son and the Spirit are committed to purifying the church and bringing her to maturity.

Church discipline is part of the church's purification process, whereby the church has been given the authority and responsibility to address sin found among its members. That is the purpose of church discipline in a nutshell. But why is that important? And how does the church practically do this? In detail, we will address the 'why' and the 'how' of church discipline below, but first there are three common misunderstandings that should be addressed.

First Misunderstanding: “How can the church discipline anyone? After all, isn't everyone a sinner?”

The answer is a resounding yes – and sinners are only saved by God's grace. The church is made up of sinners, and God has no expectation that we are to be perfect. Therefore, it would be unbiblical for any of us to expect that others are to be perfect. But God does expect that we daily wrestle with and repent of our sin¹, and so we should have the same expectation of one another.

Church discipline is carried out to its greatest extent when someone in the church, a sinner saved by grace, refuses to repent of sin. Repentance means more than being sorry – literally, it means to turn: to turn from sin and toward Jesus. It requires change, which is more than simply feeling remorse or regret for our actions. The most severe form of church discipline, which is to remove an individual from fellowship and put them out of the church, is not reserved for those whose sin is most severe, but for those who are unrepentant.

Second Misunderstanding: “If Jesus was found in the company of lawbreakers and unrepentant sinners all the time, why would the church discipline them?”

The answer is that the church should never discipline those who are not saved. Church discipline is reserved for those who claim to be followers of Christ and are actually a part of

¹ 1 John 1:8, Philippians 3:12

the church.² In fact, Jesus is the one who first prescribed church discipline in Matthew 18, which we will discuss below, and He clearly prescribed it for believers in the church. Church discipline was never intended for those who are not saved and who are not disciples of Jesus. This has been one of the grave errors of fundamentalism – Christians treating the unsaved as if they are saved. One of the worst things we can do to unsaved people is to expect them to obey Christ before they have come to know and trust Him as Lord and Savior.

Third Misunderstanding: “Does this mean that, as a Christian, the church is out to get me?”

The answer is no. The church is not an investigative unit like the ones seen on television shows such as CSI or NCIS – meaning that we are not setting out to find out who is living in sin and who is not. Church discipline is only administered when sin is admitted/confessed, or when it is public. Below, we will explain more about what confessed and public sin means. The point to understand here is that we trust the Holy Spirit to bring sin into the light,³ and we do not start the process of church discipline until that happens.

So, having addressed those questions, what is the purpose of church discipline?

PURPOSE OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Contrary to what many seem to believe, church discipline is not about punishment. Above, we said that church discipline is part of the church’s purification process, and this process is actually for the good of the church! Consider why parents discipline their children, or why coaches discipline their athletes. It is always with the hope of seeing them grow and mature. In the context of the church, discipline has three specific purposes.

Church discipline is meant for the good of the individual.

Sin is our mortal enemy, and when we refuse to repent of sin we are effectively choosing to worship an idol – something has become more important to us than God. Idolatry dishonors God, but it also destroys us.⁴ Discipline is God’s way of calling us to repentance, not simply so we will feel remorse over our past, but so that we will make changes for the sake of our future, which God cares about even more than we do. The goal of discipline is *always* restoration for the individual.

Church discipline is meant for the good of the corporate body.

² 1 Corinthians 5:12

³ James 1:15-16

⁴ Ephesians 5:13

Often, unrepentant Christians think their sin only affects them. But the reality is that sin affects everyone around us. The consequences are not precise, but are often catastrophic and far-reaching. In that way, sin is much more like a bomb than a bullet – there are always casualties. Church discipline is one of the ways that God protects the church. In the Bible, Israel was instructed to remove lepers from the camp so that the entire nation would not succumb to disease.⁵ In the same way, unrepentant Christians are removed from the church so that the entire body will not succumb to idolatry.⁶

Church discipline is meant for the good of the watching world.

God left his church on earth to be a witness to everything that Jesus taught and did. Matthew 28:16-20 and Acts 1:7-8 make it clear that Jesus gave this mission to the church before he ascended to heaven. The whole point of the Gospel, indeed the grand narrative of the Bible, is that God saves sinners – and the church is the tool through which He has chosen to reach sinners. When the church tolerates unrepentant sin within its ranks, the mission of the church is compromised. How can the church call non-believers to repentance and faith in Jesus if we are not willing to repent ourselves? How can a non-believer understand what repentance looks like if it is not modeled? As Christians, we are called to walk in a manner worthy of the Gospel⁷ – if we don't, then the message we proclaim will be compromised, and the world will suffer for it.

Now that we have an understanding of the Biblical purposes behind church discipline, how is it applied?

HOW CHURCH DISCIPLINE WORKS

Discipline happens in stages. Fortunately for the church, Jesus gave us a clear explanation of what those stages look like in Matthew 18:15-17:

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

We see from this passage that the four stages of discipline are:

Stage One: Privately confront

⁵ Numbers 5:2

⁶ 1 Corinthians 5:6-13

⁷ Phil 1:27

- Stage Two: Bring witnesses
- Stage Three: Tell it to the church
- Stage Four: Treat as an unbeliever

We will walk through all four of these stages in detail. At the end, we will address how discipline works for leaders in the church, as the Bible gives us reason to approach them differently. Keep in mind that Jesus' commands are not a description of how discipline might work, but are a prescription for how it should work.

Stage One: Privately Confront

This first stage is where we live all the time. God puts us into community to hold each other accountable, and so accountability is something that each of us gives and receives. We provide each other accountability by holding one another to the standard of the Gospel. When a brother or sister's conduct is not in line with the Gospel, we approach that person out of love and show them where they have gone wrong. Likewise, we receive accountability by humbly responding with repentance when others point out when we are out of step with the Gospel.

Proverbs 27:17 says, "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another." We sharpen each other by holding each other accountable. When we do this, we help keep each other aligned with the Gospel and useful to God in His mission. As 2 Timothy 2:21 states:

Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.

It is extremely rare for discipline to go beyond Stage One. It happens only when people receive Stage One accountability and are given ample time to repent, but refuse to do so. When this happens, we are commanded to move to the second stage of church discipline.

Stage Two: Bring Witnesses

Why do we bring witnesses? The ultimate reason is that Jesus tells us to in Matthew 18:16. Jesus is actually referring to an Old Testament passage, Deuteronomy 19:15, on how to administrate justice in a legal dispute.

A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.

There is wisdom in bringing witnesses, and our own justice system testifies to this. In the trial of a criminal, the defendant will likely stand condemned in court if two or more witnesses

testify against him with the same account. Without a plurality of witnesses, there is nothing more than a debate of “he said, she said”.

That is why Christians should not entertain disputes of “he said, she said”. Stage Two is only possible if either of the following are true:

- (1) Public sin: two or more people witnessed the person sin
- (2) Confessed sin: the sinning person testifies against himself by confessing to another person.

In the cases where the above is true the appropriate action is to go together and confront the person. With two or more witnesses, there is a stronger case that the accusation is not being fabricated or is the subjective opinion of one person. If the accused repents, most often the remaining stages are unnecessary. (Leaders are an exception and will be discussed in further detail below.)

It is recommended that at least one elder be involved in this stage even if they are not one of the witnesses. At the very least an elder must be notified. There are two wise reasons for this. First, it keeps the church from slipping into a vigilante culture where small groups start executing justice outside the supervision of Biblical leadership. Second, it allows the elder involved to communicate what will happen in the next two stages if the person refuses to repent. At their discretion, elders may either be present in the Stage Two confrontation or send a qualified leader on their behalf.

It is very possible that you may be the only witness to a person’s sin and, having confronted them, that person continues to deny it. The best course of action at this point is to prayerfully hand the situation over to God and pray that He will lead your brother or sister to repentance. 1 Timothy 5:24 reminds us that some sins may be hidden for a time, but eventually will come into the light. This keeps us from the temptation to become “sin-investigators”.

Rarely does church discipline go beyond Stage Two. It happens only when people receive Stage Two accountability, are given ample time to repent, but still refuse to realign themselves to the Gospel. When this happens, we are commanded to move to the third stage of church discipline.

Stage Three: Tell It To The Church

This is one of the most disputed stages of church discipline. Because of the sudden increase in severity, much of the disagreement is centered around whether or not this is even necessary. Matthew 18:17 makes a clear case for this stage: “If he refuses to listen to them (Stage Two witnesses), tell it to the church.” We can conclude from this verse that bringing unrepentant sin before the church is necessary at some point.

At this stage, the nature of church discipline has a lot do to with the person, their faith, and their current relationship to the church. At One Harbor, we administrate Stage Three discipline depending on which of the following three categories a person identifies with:

- Non-believers
- Attenders (Believers but not partners)
- Partners

Additionally, for Attenders and Partners, we will consider how to respond if the person removes themselves from fellowship or if the person chooses to remain in the church.

Non-Believers

The church must be open to those outside the faith attending services and hearing the Gospel, as it is our hope God will save with them. To demand a non-believer to adhere to the same standards of holiness as a Christian is a slippery slope to legalism and moralism.

Therefore, our doors are always open to non-believers who attend peaceably and are not leading others astray. Our fellowship with them is always motivated by love and a hope to see them come to a saving faith in Jesus. When it comes to non-believers, we are always calling them to repentance and faith in Jesus. Therefore, in the case of a non-believer, we would not tell their sin to the church.

Attenders Who Leave

What do we do when believers attending the church remove themselves from fellowship after Stage Two? When this happens the discipline process will most likely end. There is typically no need to tell their sin to the church.

The purpose of this stage is for the church to show the sinner that sin is serious. The person is forced to conclude either the whole church is wrong and they are right, or they are wrong and the whole church is right. But if the person leaves the church unrepentant they have spoken with their actions, knowing the church stands against them. There is no further action to take beyond calling them to repentance as often as we see them. They have preempted any further church discipline by willingly severing ties with the church.

The exception may be that if the individual is of considerable influence in the church, or the sin is widely known, the elders may find it appropriate to tell it to the church, as they would for a Partner.

It would also be expected that the individual would no longer attend a Community Group or any other church related gathering, as those are extended fellowships of the church.

Attenders Who Don't Leave

What should we do if an individual continues to attend the church but refuses to repent? There is a lot of confusion about this because it is a unique scenario to our times, which means this stage of discipline often gets ignored or misapplied. The New Testament was written in a time where churches were few and far between and confessing believers were deeply committed to staying in fellowship with one another. There was no category of “attender but not member” in the apostle’s day like the one we are considering. Much like dating relationships are complicated when people never get married, so also church relationships are complicated when people never commit to the church. The commitment to the relationship is what brings clarity.

What then are we to do when a person is in sin, has never committed to the church as a Partner, and desires to stay in the church rather than leave? In this case, two or more elders would privately meet with the person. Depending on the results of that meeting the elders would together agree on a decision of whether or not to tell it to the church. Considerations would include how much influence the individual had in the church and how public the sin was.

Partners Who Leave

If a Partner decides to leave the church, then that individual has severed the covenant relationship with the church. The discipline would continue in the same manner as described above for the category of Attenders Who Leave.

Partners Who Don’t Leave

Because a Partner is recognized as a true believer by the church and its leaders, and because Partners are in covenant relationship, when a Partner knowingly continues in sin and fellowship past Stage Two, the elders must tell it to the church as Jesus commanded.

This stage of telling the church is meaningful because the church has been affirming this person’s faith, supported them in their walk, and has a meaningful relationship with the Partner. The church is to be told about the person’s sin not as a matter of gossip or public ridicule, but to enlist the help of the entire congregation in appealing to the sinner.

It is important to note that this is not the stage where the person is removed from church fellowship – that is the final stage.

Stage Four: Treat Them As An Unbeliever

When Jesus said to treat people as Gentiles or tax-collectors, that meant to treat them as an unbeliever. This is the final stage of church discipline. We only get to this point after exhausting all our attempts of calling the person to repent. It makes sense for this to happen after Stage Three as the church has already confronted the person. This is also why believers

involved in Stage One and 2 don't skip Stage Three and withhold fellowship on their own. To do so would show a lack of submission to the church leadership and the Partners in the church as well as a misunderstanding of authority in God's kingdom. The church that was united in confronting the sin, stays united in withholding fellowship until there is repentance. The motivation here is to call the individual to repentance, to prevent the sin from spreading through the rest of the corporate body, and to maintain the purity of the church's witness for the sake of the watching world. (See Purpose of Church Discipline on page 3.)

This does not give us license to treat the person with hostility or contempt. Instead, we should reach out to them like Jesus did with the tax collectors and Gentiles in His day, by lovingly calling them to turn from their sin. There is one significant difference: as long as the individual remains unrepentant and continues to claim faith in Jesus, believers must not carry on a relationship with that person as if nothing were wrong. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 5:9–11:

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one.

Even at this point, however, the primary goal with regard to the offender is to win them back. 2 Thessalonians 3:15 says, “Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” There is a sense in which you never really let them go; though you put them out of the church, you keep calling them back. This does not mean you cannot speak to them or be cordial, but it means your relationship with should be characterized by the question, “When will you return to Jesus?”

If the offender at any time demonstrates genuine repentance, they are to be welcomed back into the fellowship as a brother, though the elders may deem it necessary for a season to walk closely with the repentant individual and look for fruit which is in keeping with repentance.⁸ At this point, it will be critical for the elders to care for the repentant sinner and protect the individual from those in the church who may wish to continue judging them as if there was no repentance.⁹

Leaders

What does the Bible say about discipline when it comes to leaders? 1 Timothy 5:19-20 says:

⁸ Matthew 3:8

⁹ 2 Corinthians 2:5-8

Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.

Regarding elders, they must not receive an accusation except when there are two or three witnesses, suggesting that it is appropriate to skip Stage One and start in Stage Two. Then, if they continue in sin past Stage Two, they are to be publicly rebuked before the church by the elders, which is Stage Three. Depending on the nature of the sin, it may be appropriate and necessary to begin with a public rebuke to protect the church from division.

Leaders are treated differently, because they will be judged more harshly¹⁰ and God will require them to give an account for the sheep in their care.¹¹

Depending on the severity and visibility of the sin, even if the leader repents, it may still require a public rebuke¹² as determined by the church's eldership team. In addition to a public rebuke, the sin may also expose a character flaw in the heart which needs to be addressed. Therefore, it may be required of the leader to step down from formal ministry for a season as the eldership team sees fit.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are two final considerations to make.

First, though we do not pursue Stage Three discipline for those who are not believers or are not Partners of our church, that does not mean that non-believers or non-Partners are always welcome. Church leadership should guard and refuse fellowship to divisive people. Divisive or dangerous people lure others into false beliefs that contradict the church's beliefs,¹³ or they may be living a life that is contrary to the faith they confess.¹⁴ Church leadership will never take a non-believer, and likely not take a believing non-partner, through Stage Three discipline. However, the leadership will remove them from fellowship if they are divisive or dangerous to the health of the church. It is the elders' job as shepherds to protect the church from false teachers, prophets, and wolves whose continued fellowship would only damage others and ruin the churches effectiveness in continuing Jesus' mission.¹⁵

Second, when someone undergoing church discipline either leaves the church or is removed from the church, the elders may feel it is necessary to notify another church of the discipline if

¹⁰ James 3:1

¹¹ Ezekiel 34; Heb. 13:17

¹² Galatians 2:11-14

¹³ Galatians 2:9; Titus 3:9-10; 3 John 1:9,10

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 5:9-11

¹⁵ Acts 20:17,28-30

the individual starts attending that church after leaving One Harbor. We do this because we care for the body of Christ, which is larger than our local church.

SCENARIO

Consider a community group leader who learns that a single man in his group, who is a Partner in the church, has a sexual relationship with a woman not in the church. Using the process described above, here is how the discipline process might work.

Stage One

The community group leader pulls the man aside for a private conversation. He lovingly and gently shares with the man his observations and explains why the man's relationship is dishonoring to God and the woman, and why it is toxic to himself. If the man confesses and repents, which would mean making changes and/or ending his relationship, then the church discipline process would end.

Stage Two

If the man does not repent, but justifies his actions, then the community group leader notifies the elder overseeing that community group of the situation. The leader will take at least one other person with him to confront the man, and at the discretion of the leader and the elder, the elder may accompany the witnesses. That group will again lovingly point out to the man the reason his relationship is sinful and call him to repentance. If he repents, which would mean making changes and/or ending his relationship, then the church discipline process would end.

Stage Three

If the man still refuses to repent after ample time has been given, then because he is a Partner living in unrepentant sin, it will become necessary to tell the church. The elders will determine how that is communicated. The church will be called on to prayerfully intercede for the man and to call him to repentance. The church will be forbidden from slandering, gossiping, or attacking the man. If the man repents, which would mean making changes and/or ending his relationship, then the church discipline process would end.

Stage Four

If the man still refuses to repent after the church has been told and ample time has been given, then the elders will notify the man and the church that the man is being put out of the church. This will mean that he will not be allowed to participate in church functions, and the church will be instructed not to continue associating with the man socially. The church will be

called on to continue praying for the man as if he were an unbeliever. The church will again be forbidden from slandering, gossiping, or attacking the man. Until the man repents, this will be the nature of the church's relationship with the man. However, if he does repent, he will be welcomed back into the church and restored as a brother.

SUMMARY

Church discipline is not only about sin, but in equal degree about unrepentance. Church discipline does not escalate according to the severity of the sin, but according to the unrepentance of the offender. Church leadership has the obligation to protect the church from the unrepentant sinner, but also to protect the repentant sinner from the church. The care of the one does not overshadow the care of the other. When applied appropriately, so that the individual and the church are properly cared for and protected, the process of church discipline honors God and edifies the individual, the church, and the watching world.