



HARVEST CHURCH

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

The New Testament is clear that the church is a gathered people who are marked by their commitment to Christ and to each other. Church discipline involves the spiritual care of people as we guard one another from the deceitfulness of sin and uphold the truth of the gospel. In this process the church becomes a very safe place for sinners and very unsafe place for sin.

THE PURPOSE

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

The goal of church discipline is not to throw people out of the church or to feed the self-righteous pride of those who administer the discipline. The purpose is to restore a sinning believer to holiness and bring them back into a pure relationship within the assembly.

Jesus says in Matthew 18 that in the process of church discipline a brother or sister can be “won.” The Greek word translated “won” was originally used of accumulating wealth. 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 purpose of church discipline is restoration and recovery (Gal. 6:1).

THE PROCESS

Church discipline largely takes place informally, as Christians speak the truth in love to one another and point each other to the grace of the gospel. However, in this fallen world, there will be times when informal discipline will not be enough; there will be times when those who belong to the church refuse to repent and continue down the path of sin. It's for these situations that Jesus provides instructions for church discipline:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that “every matter may be established by the testimony 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, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (Matt. 18:15–17)

Every single step of this process is an expression of Christ's shepherding loving and wise rule over his church, and therefore every step ought to be followed. There are some sins that can be overlooked, some which the Lord Himself will reveal through prayer and fasting and some that we

will require a brother or sister to come alongside those who are sinning and lovingly and prayerfully correct them in a spirit of gentleness.

STEP #1: PRIVATE CONVERSATION. (Matt. 18:15)

Whenever possible, especially if the offense is petty or unintentional, it is best to forgive unilaterally (Ephesians 4:1-3; 1 Corinthians 13:5). If every fault required formal confrontation, the whole of our church life would be spent confronting and resolving conflicts over petty annoyances. So, for the sake of peace, to preserve the unity of the Spirit, we are to show tolerance whenever possible. But where the sin is grievous and/or damaging to the body of Christ, there should be gracious confrontation (Galatians 6:1-2).

The process of restoration then begins with a private confrontation. This will happen regularly in the life of a healthy church in all kinds of contexts. The member who knows of unrepentant sin is to go to the one who has sinned and, in love and humility, clearly expose the sin and then call them to repentance. Rather than cultivating gossip and division, Jesus commands his people to speak privately first, "just between the two of [them]." And in God's grace, so often this is the means by which God works repentance and restoration among His people.

STEP #2: TAKE ONE OR TWO OTHERS ALONG (Matt. 18:16)

If the person confronted refuses to listen, the next step in the discipline process is to take one or two more believers along to confront 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 also to confirm that there has been a proper rebuke and if there has been repentance. The presence of additional witnesses is as much a protection for the one being approached as it is for the one approaching.

It's worth considering, at this point, whether there might be another member of the church (perhaps a trusted friend, Small Group Leader, etc.) to speak into the person's life.

Those involved up to this point should evaluate the response of the one caught in sin and determine if there's evidence of genuine, lasting repentance. Of course, the goal isn't perfection but rather a heart that's broken over sin and clinging to Christ, evidenced by humility and a willingness to follow wise counsel.

In many cases, this step may take weeks, or months, or even longer. Often, it's here that God brings about repentance and reconciliation, but in some cases, it will become evident to those involved that there's no genuine repentance and the church will proceed to the next step.

STEP #3: INVOLVE LEADERS OR ELDERS BY INFORMING THEM OF THE SITUATION

If this has not already occurred during step #2, an elder or other leader of the church (like a Small Group Leader or Coach) will likely be involved. Eventually the elders should become a part of the process as they have been given the biblical responsibility over the church.

The elders have the responsibility to prayerfully shepherd those involved. Is the sin concrete and serious enough to warrant taking the next steps of formal church discipline? Are there extenuating circumstances that the member might not know? Are there other members who might better speak to the one caught in sin? How do we care for those who have been wronged?

STEP #4: GIVE ADEQUATE NOTICE TO THE ONE CAUGHT IN SIN

Jesus is clear that, if there is no repentance, the matter is to be brought to the church (v. 17a). How long should we continue to call the person to repentance before telling the church? The elders at Harvest Church avoid carrying out the 5th step of church discipline until they are absolutely certain that the erring believer has truly sinned, or is continuing to sin, and that they have refused to repent when appropriately confronted.

The goal of this contact is to explain the charges and express the elders' love and concern and to give the unrepentant member a chance to meet with the leaders personally and make sure there is no misunderstanding.

If after this step, repentance does take place, the sinning believer is forgiven and restored.

If the person remains unrepentant, then it's necessary to notify them of when this will be shared with the congregation. Given the need for clarity and precision in communication, this contact will involve some form of written communication.

STEP #5: TELL IT TO THE CHURCH (Matt. 18:17)

At this point, Jesus commands the member to "tell it to the church" – the local gathering of disciples in his name (Matt. 18:20, see 1 Cor. 5:4). In this step, the elders will communicate what's taken place to the congregation.

Given the sensitive nature, the person's sin and refusal to repent are made known, most often, in a Members Meeting or through a smaller group in which the person is known (this will depend on the level of leadership or influence of the unrepentant member).

The elders will carefully and prayerfully think through how much to communicate to the congregation. Elders will communicate, through reading a written statement, enough so that the congregation understands what has taken place and the need for church discipline. However, elders will not communicate so much that it makes returning upon repentance difficult because of public shame, embarrassing family members, or causes weaker sheep to stumble.

After the elders read the letter, there will be opportunity for people to follow up with further questions.

Having been apprised of the situation, those in the church who have a personal relationship with the one caught in sin will be encouraged to prayerfully pursue the person to plead with them to repent before the 6th step becomes necessary.

This period of time between step #5 and step #6 may take weeks or months or may need to be more immediate if the church feels confident about a lack of repentance (1 Cor. 5:1-5).

STEP #6: REMOVE THE UNREPENTANT PERSON FROM MEMBERSHIP (Matt. 18:17)

After following all the previous steps, if the individual continues to refuse to listen “even to the church,” then the elders should update the congregation on the situation and inform that they have been removed from the membership of the church.

The church needs to understand that they no longer affirm this person’s profession of faith. They are to relate to him no longer as one who belongs to the church but to the world, like “a pagan or tax collector.”

Following the removal, the goal is not for the church to shun the person or to cut off all relationship. Rather, members should relate to them as someone in need of the gospel, yet who is self-deceived. In that sense, interactions are more complex than relating with non-Christian friends who know they are non-Christians. Any interactions should be used to call the person to repentance and to remind them of the hope of the gospel.

Members should encourage the person to attend the services of the church and to sit under the preaching of the Word. And yet, at the same time, they must avoid relating to them casually as if nothing has changed.

The purpose of removing the person from membership is to protect the purity of the church (1 Cor. 5:6), to warn the church of the seriousness of sin (1 Tim. 5:20), and to give a testimony of righteousness to a watching world. But it is also for the welfare of the one trapped in sin to awaken them to their situation, so it must be done in humble love and never in a spirit of self-righteous superiority (2 Thess. 3:15).

After the meeting, the elders will send a written communication to the individual, informing them of the act of discipline, and expressing their love for them and their desire for their repentance and restoration. Elders will also continue to be available for concerns or questions from the church.

CONCLUSION

Jesus came to save a people for himself and so, while difficult, church discipline is a gift. The church is a gathering of those who through repentance and faith have received the hope of Christ’s salvation and are helping each other persevere in that hope. To neglect church discipline is to fail to love one another in that way. So, as we labor to follow Christ’s instructions for the purity of the church, we cling to the hope of the gospel both for ourselves and for those around us.