

Restorative Church Discipline

The Bible acknowledges times when professing Christians fall into sin. Sadly, there are occasions when Christians may commit acts of significant sin (e.g., a sexual sin, an angry outburst); sometimes Christians fall into sinful habits or persistent patterns of sin (e.g., bitterness, gossip). In such cases, it's the church's responsibility to discern instances and patterns of sin in its midst and to make a biblical judgment about the nature of the sin (cf. 1 Cor. 5:9–6:3). With biblical clarity and conviction, the church must lovingly confront the sinning Christian in the interest of restoring him back into fellowship with Christ and His church.

Church discipline is about love for Christ, His glory, and His people. Since those who continue in sin hurt themselves and others, it's inherently *unloving* to allow professing Christians to continue in sin. It's important to emphasize, therefore, that we practice church discipline to *restore* an erring believer, teaching him to identify his sin and work out repentance, so he can become a joyful and fruitful member of the church once again.

The several passages that provide instruction on restorative church discipline (i.e., 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 1 Tim. 5:20; Tit. 3:10-11) are based on Jesus' clear outline for confrontation in Matthew 18:15-17. Jesus provides the church with four steps to follow in working out the process of church discipline: (1) confront privately, (2) confront transparently, (3) confront publicly, and (4) remove formally.

Although those steps follow in order of increasing severity, ending finally with excommunication from the local church, all four steps are usually not required. In most cases the sinning Christian repents after the first private confrontation. In fact, this first step should be happening all the time in a healthy church (cf. Rom. 15:15; Col. 3:16). Only the refusal to repent requires taking additional steps.

Step 1: Confront Privately

Matt. 18:15 – 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.

Since Christians love Christ and His holiness, since they love one another, they don't want to dishonor Christ or offend His people. But Christians *do* continue to struggle with sin. They are forgiven of sin and redeemed from sin, but they have not yet been perfected in holiness. Sadly, that means their sin will hurt one another. By practicing

this first step of restorative church discipline as a normal (though, hopefully, not frequent!) pattern of church life, every Christian exercises a sanctifying influence on others in the church.

When a professing Christian commits sin against another Christian, a private conversation is necessary to protect the offender and help him see his fault. Paul instructed, in Gal. 6:1-2, “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

Practically, it may take some time, and perhaps several private conversations, for the offender to see his fault. “If he listens to you,” rejoice; “you have gained your brother.” If, however, the patient, gentle confrontation fails to bring about repentance, and the offender hardens his heart, Jesus tells a Christian to take a second step.

Step 2 – Confront Transparently

Matt. 18:16 – 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.

The presence of witnesses is not to embarrass the offender, or to gang up on him to coerce repentance. The presence of others provides clarity and transparency in an interpersonal conflict, leading to greater objectivity and accountability. After all, Prov. 18:17 cautions us, “the one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.”

Having the eyes and ears of two or three other Christians is beneficial for both parties. If the evidence for the charges is too thin, then the whole matter can be dropped before it goes any further. But if several Christian witnesses establish the evidence against the offender, hopefully the combined testimony will enable him to see his sin and repent.

Again, the practical outworking of the second step may take time and several meetings to establish the facts, to make biblical-informed judgments, and to confront in humility and gentleness. The patience and effort is worth it, because if the offender repents, his repentance is cause for great rejoicing—you have won your brother. But again, if he persists in hard-hearted unrepentance, Jesus tells Christians to take a third step.

Step 3 – Confront Publicly

Matt. 18:17a – If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.

The principle behind this third step is found in Proverbs 27:5: “Better is open rebuke than hidden love.” In some cases it takes the corporate judgment of the entire church to help a sinning believer see the reality and significance of his sin.

It’s at the third step that the elders get involved in the church discipline process. Before exposing an offense to the whole congregation, it is prudent for the elders to verify the charges and the evidence brought by the offended party and his two or three witness. If more evidence, time, or investigation is required, the elders can provide the needed oversight.

If the case is established in the judgment of the elders and they affirm the necessity to proceed with the third step, it’s good for them to inform the offender of their intentions (i.e., in person, by phone, or by registered letter). The potential for public embarrassment may cause the offender to repent; but if not, the elders must bring the matter to the assembled church.

Usually the third step takes place before the church participates in communion. The pastor or an elder names the offender and identifies the nature of his sin (exercising all possible discretion), and then calls the church to appeal to the offender and pray for his repentance. The clarity of the public announcement not only avoids rumors from starting, but it also provokes a healthy sense of compassion mixed with fear among the congregation (cf. 1 Tim. 5:19-21).

If the offender refuses to repent under the appeal of a loving local church congregation, Jesus then requires the church to take one final step.

Step 4 – Remove Formally

Matt. 18:17b – And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

When Jesus uses the terms *Gentile* and *tax collector*, He’s not using them as insults; rather, He is acknowledging the true nature of an offender’s relationship to the believing community. A Gentile never belonged to the covenant community of Israel, by birth or by heritage; and one became a tax collector by betraying his spiritual heritage, preferring

money over fidelity to his people. So to Jewish ears, treating someone as “a Gentile and a tax collector” meant treating the unrepentant offender as no longer a member of the covenant community.

For a Christian, Jesus’ fourth step means treating one who professes Christ but remains unrepentant as a non-Christian. Rather than treat him as an enemy, he is to be viewed as a lost sinner who needs salvation. A sinner who has refused the repeated appeals of loving Christians in his life is in need of the initial repentance that leads to salvation (2 Cor. 7:10).

When someone who professes Christ refuses to repent and submit to Christ, excommunication becomes necessary to promote and preserve the purity of the local church. For example, when the Corinthians failed to exercise discipline in a clear-cut case (a man was committing adultery with his step-mother), Paul rebuked the church, saying,

Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Cor. 5:6-8)

Since the church lives as a testimony to the holiness of Christ, every local church must discipline those who profess the name of Christ. “Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness,” (2 Tim. 2:19), for apart from the church’s testimony of holiness, “no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14).

When a local church makes a judgment about an unrepentant sinner, having followed the four steps the Lord prescribed in Matt. 18:15-17, they have carried out the judgment of heaven through their pronouncement on earth. Jesus went on to say,

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. (Matt. 18:18-20)

Through the testimony of the two or three witnesses, established before the elders and the gathered church, Jesus Christ Himself has made His will known to the church and the watching world. Church discipline is a solemn duty, demonstrating compassionate love for people and holy love for Christ.