

A Study of Biblical Church Discipline

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By design, the word “Biblical” stands before “Church Discipline” and for good reason. Most of us are aware of how church discipline has been misused and abused. However, the remedy for poorly practiced church discipline is *not* to stop practicing church discipline, but to practice it in the right way (i.e., according to biblical standards). Church Discipline is defined as the loving, compassionate, and humble confrontation and appeal by the body of Christ to a sinning believer, calling for repentance and recommitment to Jesus Christ.

Wayward members

The church constitution provides the steps of action to be taken regarding members who purposefully refuse to attend church services. Continuous willful absence from services shall result in steps of restoration. The issue of willful absence from the assembling of ourselves together (**Hebrews 10:25**) is an act of disobedience. The motive of our steps of actions is to communicate the seriousness and importance of honoring Christ through His church.

- The primary reason for church discipline is to glorify God through obedience to His commands.
- We must place the spiritual rescue of erring brothers and sisters above our own comfort. Diligent effort should be made to reclaim all members who spiritually fall. **Galatians 6:1**
- Church discipline is redemptive in nature, not punitive.
- Far too many congregations tolerate sin in general as well as in their own membership.
- Past failure on the churches’ part in the matter of discipline should motivate us to demonstrate an accurate view of it, not a neglect of it.
- Though sometimes misunderstood, it is very loving to graciously call sinning believers to repentance, helping them restore proper fellowship with God.
- Church discipline provides a platform for the church to display genuine love.

Love is helping people toward the greatest beauty and the highest value and the deepest satisfaction and the most lasting joy and the biggest reward and the most wonderful friendship and the most overwhelming worship – **love is leading people toward God.** John Piper

Love is a willing self-sacrifice for the good of another that does not expect reciprocation nor is it given because the one being loved is deserving of it. Adapted...Paul Tripp

- Our obedience to church discipline is an issue of faith: trusting God enough to obey Him.

- **Faith is obeying God** regardless of feelings, circumstances or consequences.

This definition of faith needs to be explored more carefully. (1) Faith is **obeying God**, in this context, obeying the clear command of Jesus Christ in confronting believers who continue in sin. (2) Faith is obeying God regardless of **feelings**; everything inside us wants to ignore confrontation. We want to wish it away, minimize it, and rationalize within our minds why we do not have to address it. (3) Faith is obeying God, regardless of feelings and **circumstances**. The circumstances that surround confrontation are never appealing. When God's Word is consistently being ignored by a fellow believer we must respond to it in a Biblical manner. Once we become aware of a sinning believer, the circumstances before us will result in either our obedience or disobedience. (4) Faith is obeying God regardless of feelings, circumstances or **consequences**. There is a chance the erring believer will not repent; this will probably result in your appeal being rejected and misunderstood. Jesus made no guarantee that restoration would occur as a result of our appeal and this is exactly why faith is needed. Our obedience is a wonderful way for the body of Christ to exhibit faith, and faith is what pleases God! **Hebrews 11:6**

Special Blessings Accompany Membership

- Submission to spiritual authority is sign of humility, and God promises grace to the humble. **James 4:10, 1 Peter 5:6**
- A non-believing spouse is blessed by God just by the very fact that there is a believing partner within the marriage. **1 Corinthians 7:14**
- Potiphar's house was blessed as a direct result of godly Joseph being one of his servants. **Genesis 39:5**
- God's blessings are removed when the church brings discipline, thereby allowing Satan and sin to have more authority upon the life of the erring member. **1Corinthian 5:1-13**

Five Biblical Principles in Confronting Others In A Way That Glorifies God

1. Evaluate Your Motives...(Ask yourself, "Why do I want to get involved?")
 - A. Curiosity or Concern
 - B. Jealously or Sincerity
 - C. To Humiliate or to Help
 - D. To glorify God by obeying his one-another commands
2. Examine Your Own Life
 - A. Does not mean you have to have your act totally together first – because no one does!
 - B. Does mean that you are in proper fellowship with Christ and His Church
 - C. Does mean you understand how God has poured grace and mercy into your life
3. Exhibit Grace

- A. See the sin as the problem, not the person as the problem.
- B. Err on the side of grace and mercy.
- C. Use “we” and “us” often in your conversation (“We all struggle.”, “All of us have issues.”)
- D. Grace and Firmness work together well. Don’t go light on sin and a call for repentance.
- E. It is easy to give grace when you realize how much you need it in your own life.

4. Exalt Christ

- A. You cannot say enough about who Christ is and what he has done for us.
- B. Focus on the price Jesus paid for us on the cross. **2 Corinthians 5:14-15**
- C. It is the person of Jesus, not just his commands we are to hold before others.
- D. It is his will, not our own agenda, which is to be highlighted.
- E. Jesus died for more than just our future. He died for our day-to-day life on this side of Heaven.

5. Engage in Prayer

- A. Pray for yourself in regards to obedience, spiritual courage, and that your appeal is grace-filled.
- B. Pray for the one you will confront, remembering it is God’s responsibility to change hearts.

“It is ever the Holy Spirit’s work to turn our eyes away from self to Jesus; but Satan’s work is just the opposite of this, for he is constantly trying to make us regard ourselves instead of Christ. He insinuates, ‘Your sins are too great for pardon, you have no faith, you do not repent enough, you will never be able to continue unto the end, you have not the joy of his children, you have such a wavering hold of Jesus.’ All these are thoughts about self, and we shall never find comfort or assurance by looking within. But the Holy Spirit turns our eyes entirely away from self; he tells us that we are nothing, but that ‘Christ is all in all.’ Remember, therefore, it is not your hold of Christ that saves you – it is Christ. It is not your joy in Christ that saves you – it is Christ; it is not even faith in Christ that saves you, though that be the instrument – it is Christ’s blood and merits; therefore look not so much to your hand with which you art grasping Christ, but to Christ.; look not to your hope, but to Jesus, the source of your hope; look not to your faith, but to Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith.

We shall never find happiness by looking at our prayers, our doings, or our feelings; it is what Jesus is, not what we are, that gives rest to the soul. If we would at once overcome Satan and have peace with God, it must be by ‘looking unto Jesus.’ Keep your eye simply on him; let his death, his sufferings, his merits, his glories, his intercession, be fresh upon your mind; when you wake in the morning look to him; when you lie down at night look to him. Do not let your hopes or fears come between you and Jesus; follow hard after him, and he will never fail you!” C.H. Spurgeon 1834-1892

A Brief Exposition of Matthew 18:15-20

Matthew 18:15-20 *Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. 16 But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. 17 And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. 18 Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in*

heaven. 19 Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. KJV

Matthew 18:15-20 Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' 17 And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. 18 "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 "Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." NKJV

Matthew 18 records the teaching of Jesus Christ in regards to (1) humility, (2) compassion, (3) confrontation and (4) forgiveness. The context of the chapter is built around a response from Christ to his disciples who asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (v1)

- The teaching of **humility** was built around God's view of children. An alarming illustration was given by Christ in regards to offending children. **18:1-10**
- The teaching of **compassion** dealt with a shepherd's concern for one lost sheep despite the fact that he had safely accounted for 99 sheep. **18:11-14**
- The teaching of **confrontation** directly deals with our topic of church discipline. **18:15-20**
- The teaching of **forgiveness** focused on two men and their debts. The parable ended with a serious warning of divine judgment for any who refused to forgive. **18:21-35**

The context of **Matthew 18:15-20** is that Jesus provided four steps of action in calling a sinning believer back to repentance. None of these steps have a promise from Christ that restoration will occur. Notice the use of the word "if" throughout the passage.

Step 1: Go alone.

Matthew 18:15 Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.

We exhibit a number of Biblical mandates when this passage is put into practice:

- Biblical love **1 Corinthians 13**
- Genuine concern for a fellow believer's spiritual welfare **Galatians 6:1-2**
- Awareness of how sin deceives and hardens the heart, making confrontation necessary **Hebrews 3:12-23**

- Keeping the matter private; retaining the information to the closest circles as possible
Proverbs 17:9

- An opportunity for reconciliation **2 Corinthians 5:18-20**

Seven Cautions to Step 1...

1. Assuming a scriptural violation has occurred, when the real issue is personal expectations or preferences that were not met, causing your feelings to get hurt.
2. Focusing more on how you were sinned against versus how God was sinned against.
3. Placing the emphasis on how you were offended instead of the spiritual recovery of the one who has sinned.
4. Confusing the balance between forbearance and confrontation.
5. Minimizing the sin to justify why you will not confront the erring believer.
6. Sharing the offense with others violates Scripture and creates additional problems.
7. Knowing if an offense is addressed, you will need to demonstrate forgiveness to the one who sinned against you. **Matthew 18:21-35**

Step 2: Go again this time with one or two other believers.

“**Considerable weight** is to be given to the judgment (counsel) of men and women who live near to God, and in most instances their verdict will not be a mistaken one...” C.H. Spurgeon

- The second confrontation with others demonstrates even greater love and concern.
- This intensifies the seriousness of unrepented of sin.
- The one or two other believers are usually, but not limited to, church leaders such as Pastors and Deacons.
- This step protects all parties involved from allowing emotions to blur the facts and goal.
- If repentance occurs, the process is ended there.
- When steps 1-2 are ignored, step 3 is to be put into motion.

Step 3: Go to the congregation.

- If the sinning member refuses to repent then he / she needs to be exposed to the congregation.
- Keep in mind that only unrepented of sin is addressed and only to the congregation if step one and two received a negative response from the sinning member.
- This is formal “church discipline” in the fact that the entire congregation is called forth to help in the restoration process.
- The goal of spiritual recovery does not change, only the number of people involved.
- Nothing will reveal a congregation’s commitment to Scripture like *biblical* Church discipline.
- The church is not infallible in the Matthew 18 passage nor will God ever endorse error, but when a congregation responds God’s way, they have his blessings.
- God himself is the authority of church discipline.
- You are richly blessed if you are a part of a church that practices biblical discipline upon its membership.

- If the sinning member refuses to listen to the congregation, then the final step needs to be taken.
- The goal of all three steps is always the same: to get the sinning member restored.

Step 4: Excommunication by the Congregation from Membership

- This is done to protect the name of Christ and to intensify the seriousness of sin to the offender.
- This action confirms the sad state of a believer who is more committed to sin than they are to Christ and His church.
- Privileges of membership such as the Lord's Supper and church fellowships are forfeited, but the offender is encouraged to attend the preaching and teaching of God's Word. Even non-believers are welcome to the public proclamation of Scripture.
- Members should avoid personal fellowship unless the purpose of the time together is to call the believer back to repentance. It is a common error for some to play the role of the "loving member" and ignore the steps of action presented by the church.
- Excommunication is reversible; if repentance and confession occurs, then membership should be reinstated and should be done so with a spirit of rejoicing and wholehearted support.

2 Corinthians 2:5-10

A member who is in the process of church discipline cannot avoid this by stating they no longer choose or desire membership. Though it is true they are free to stop attending services and may choose to exercise that right, their membership is bound by a congregational vote for official removal. Members waive their right to withdrawal from membership when discipline is pending and must wait for the congregation's fulfillment of their Biblical mandate to encourage repentance and restoration. One's commitment to membership is a commitment to *not* run from discipline and grant the congregation liberty in their attempt to rescue and spiritually restore the member.

Possible Objections to Church Discipline

1. "We would be constantly confronting believers because we sin against each other all the time."

First of all, make sure a biblical violation is clearly in order. You must be able to clearly identify it. There is no doubt this step has been abused because of a member who was too suspicious or sensitive, which led them to imagine themselves wronged without any true foundation. However, we cannot disregard our Lord's command simply because some abuse this step. On the other hand, the nature of sin is that it is never satisfied. Delay will only lead to one becoming more persistent in their sin as well as leading others into their sin. The bottom line is this: sin complicates life for everyone involved and we need to encourage one another to protect our hearts from it. **Proverbs 4:23, Hebrews 3:12-13**

2. "What if I obey this command and the believer continues to sin against me?"

This is the same objection Peter brought up in **Matthew 18** and Jesus addressed in verses **21-22**. The bottom line is this: does forgiveness have a limit? No, it does not. Does this mean we become foolish in how we allow people to treat us or do we become some form of doormat for others to abuse? Of course not. If a person continues to repeat their sin toward you, sound reason would serve that there is a lack of genuine repentance and a need for additional help is in order. You would seek counsel and support from other spiritually mature believers.

3. “If you bring a member before the congregation, you could possibly cause a serious division.”

This is very true, but if the goal of restoration in a spirit of love is portrayed, the damage should be minimal. This being said, losing members is not a pleasant thing to deal with. However, nothing will prove the congregation’s commitment to Scripture more than church discipline. When a member has family or friends under discipline, the true test of love for Jesus Christ is on the line.

4. “Every member sins and some sin in a very offensive manner. We would have church discipline constantly if we took it seriously.”

It is true we all sin and we should not take any sin lightly even though our sin does not lessen God’s love for us in one degree. However, unconfessed sin does break fellowship with God and calls for his displeasure and discipline. **Hebrews 12:5-11** The answer to the objection is this: only **unrepented** of sin is brought before the congregation. That is the reason for the process of step one and two. If repentance occurs, then church discipline ceases.

5. “Church discipline, especially excommunication, seems so unloving.”

It may appear unloving but the very opposite is true. Nothing is more loving than calling a person to be in a right relationship with Jesus Christ. The problem with this objection is that the church has bought into the culture’s definition of love. Church discipline is a great opportunity to reveal what true love looks like.

6. What if the disciplined member wanted to meet with me or have lunch?

The social impact of discipline has lost its force in our day due to various reasons and the reality is that many who are under discipline just join another church. With that said, the mandate found in 2 Thessalonians 3:14-16 states that to “have no company with him”, and 1 Corinthians 5:11 states “not to keep company with” and “not even eat with such a person.” It seems clear that any and all normal types of church wide fellowships are jeopardized. Yet the Thessalonian passage also states “admonish him as a brother.” Is it a hard and fast rule that any meal or meeting with an excommunicated member is out? The Corinthian passage lists others for exclusion of fellowship, the sexually immoral, greedy, idolater, abusive, drunkards and swindlers. The context is this, these members were known for their ungodly lifestyle and yet they desired to participate in church fellowship. They wanted both their sin and their spiritual community; they loved the world and yet did not want to give up the benefits of the church. Scripture teaches you don’t get both, and the church family supports such teaching by not

allowing them to join in on the communion and fellowship dinners. But does this also mean individual members could not meet with the sinning brother or sister? The Matthew 18 passage informs us to treat the member who has been excommunicated like an unsaved person. We would want to be kind to someone without Christ; we would want to spend time with them to share the gospel. So the question is what if the one under discipline asks to meet you for lunch? This is a difficult question with various perspectives. Perhaps like other New Testament principles, God left some room for variation. One thing is certain, when working through church discipline; the variables are unlimited with the erring member as well as with his or her family and friends. Church discipline seems as if you are aiming at a moving target due to the numerous circumstances and the varying levels of spiritual maturity of all personalities directly or indirectly involved. At excommunication, the entire congregation is involved. With these challenges in mind, the following points are presented as guidelines to help each believer navigate through the murky and unsettled waters that at times accompany church discipline.

Guidelines regarding meeting with an unrepentive member:

A. What is the motive or purpose for meeting? It would have to be clear, very clear that the purpose for meeting was to defend the decision of the congregation and call the person to repentance. This topic to some degree must be a part of the conversation. Motives play a major role in the Christian life. God looks at our heart and we need the Holy Spirit and the Word of God to help reveal our motives. Therefore if the motive is to call the one we are meeting with to repentance, then effort should be made to do so. (Hebrews 4:12-13, Psalm 139:23-24)

B. A full and pure application to the command “don’t eat with them” in 1 Corinthians 5 would mean no member should meet for lunch or dinner with one who is under formal church discipline. Again, the question is this, was the command regarding church-wide dinners that were very common and called agape or love fellowships? Such meals were designed to meet both physical and spiritual needs of the members.

Perhaps the “spirit of the command” would allow an individual member to meet him or her at a house or at another private setting, but at a location that would not place you in a compromising position. Again, the meeting is to occur only if the motive is to call for repentance. The reason for a consideration of the “spirit of the command” allowance is that it provides an opportunity to speak truth into a person’s life without them being connected to church-wide fellowship. The question is was Paul’s example of “do not eat with” only referring to the church at large when they had dinner fellowships? Was Paul also referring to the individual member? It makes more sense if Paul only had the church fellowships in mind because it would allow for the “spiritual” members to admonish the fallen member to repentance. However, if a congregation embraces the view that it allows for “individual members” to reach out to these disciplined members the following should be in order. 1. The church leaders are to be made aware of the meeting to protect the testimony of the one reaching out. 2. The leaders would determine if the congregation would need this same information. For example, if the disciplined member was very influential or there was concern over social media, then the membership may be included.

7. "What if the excommunicated member feels injustice has occurred in their dismissal?"

Rest assured, in most cases where repentance is *not* displayed, the expelled member is sure to think they have been dealt with unjustly and more than likely they will have certain members who agree. For this reason, careful attention needs to be given to how graciously the steps of actions are handled, and clear and deliberate teaching needs to be demonstrated before the congregation.

Biblical Examples of Discipline

- **1 Corinthians 5:1-13** This is perhaps the best known and longest passage on church discipline. There was a member of the church who was having an immoral relationship with his father's wife. The judgment passed down was very severe due to his lack of repentance. The member was to be excommunicated in hope that his sinful desires would bring him to an end of himself. Take notice of how Satan's influence is brought into play once the man is removed from the blessings of being a part of God's church. The purpose in Paul's instruction was in hope that the man would eventually repent and recommit himself back to God. Notice the stepmother was not addressed and we could assume for the reason that she was not a member of the church. This implies that the idea of membership was practiced in the early church despite some people's claim that membership cannot be found in the New Testament.
- **2 Thessalonians 3:6-15** In this congregation, certain members were being slothful and justified their inactivity by saying it was God's will. The instruction to the church was to disassociate themselves with those guilty in order that shame may bring them to repentance.
- **1 Timothy 1:20** Paul informed Timothy of two men who had made a shipwreck of their walk with Christ, and he turned them over to Satan that they would learn some important lessons about sound doctrine.
- **1 Timothy 5:19-20** Instructions were provided on how to discipline a leader of the church. The purpose of public rebuke was to express to the entire body how seriously God takes godliness within the lives of his children.
- **Titus 3:9-11** Some members of the church where Titus was pastor caused some disunity among the congregation. They were to be repeatedly warned by the leaders of their seriousness of this sin, and if repentance did not occur then they were to be excommunicated.
- **Romans 16:16-17** Those who cause division as a result of their false teaching were to be exposed before all and were to be avoided lest they bring further damage to the Lord's church.

It is clear that the church has the right to expose and excommunicate those who refuse to take purity and unity seriously. The work of the Church is of eternal consequence, and to have the name of Christ damaged by a member who refuses to take their sin seriously cannot go unchallenged.

In review we must remember that our primary goal is to glorify God by calling sinning believers to repentance. This process requires a great amount of faith on the part of the congregation at the risk of

being misunderstood and misrepresented. However, the practice of church discipline pleases God and makes possible spiritual restoration thereby making obedience well worth any risk.

1 John 1:1-7 *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life 2 the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us 3 that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, **that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.** 4 And these things we write to you that your joy may be full. 5 This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. NKJV*

The appeal of the church's call for repentance and restored fellowship is that **their fellowship is with the Father and Jesus Christ.** There could be no better, richer, greater, deeper reason to be in a right relationship with one's church family.

"...that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ..."