

Philosophy of Restoration

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When looking at this area, the pivotal issue everything else revolves around is the responsibility of the church to speak the Word of God to its members (Hebrews 13:7) and to keep watch over their souls (Hebrews 13:17). This same passage tells us that it is the church leadership who will “*give an account*” to God for such watchcare. Since “*a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough*” (1 Corinthians 5:6) and rebellion in the body that is not addressed affects the whole body. Everyone who sees rebellion in the body that the leadership is unwilling to address is encouraged to take their own sin less seriously. Sin must be dealt with and this process is often referred to as “church discipline.” But discipline is only one facet of the restoration process, and perhaps even more significant, the discipline component exists not as an end in itself, but to facilitate the overarching objective which is restoration. Therefore, we refer to this process as the “Ministry of Restoration.”

With Sin In The Body

The *place* of discipline and restoration according to Matthew 18 is “the church.” There is no higher court to appeal to, and no legal loopholes to side step through. If, after Biblical confrontation, a sinning brother refuses to repent then his rebellion is to be told to the church (Matthew 18:17) so that they can participate in the process by also calling him to repentance, and by breaking fellowship if necessary. A rebellious, unrepentant brother is to be treated as a gentile or a tax-gatherer was by first century Jews. The discipline component is not merely a “wrist-slap” by the elders behind closed doors.

The *purpose* of discipline is not punishment, but restoration. Discipline does not exist for its own sake, but as a tool of the church to be handled with love and discernment for the purpose of bringing about the restoration of a sinning brother. This is accomplished by faithfully holding in place the consequences of sin so they may act. Sin breaks spiritual fellowship and unity because the one sinning is no longer in the Spirit and able to relate spirit to spirit (Ephesians 4:13) with a surrendered believer. If this broken fellowship is not also maintained physically, then the relationship is redefined and the consequences of the sin are not held in place. The sinner is allowed to hold on to his sin while his relationships, though stained, remain intact. This is not God’s way. Breaking fellowship, an act the whole body participates in, is God’s way of isolating the sinner with his sin and helping him see more quickly how distasteful it really is. The motive behind this is so he will come to his senses like the prodigal son, he will remember how much better it was before, and he will return in repentance. The motive can never be vengeance, for that belongs to God alone.

The *person* of discipline initially is the offended brother (Matthew 18:15), not some committee of spiritual henchmen. Hopefully, in most cases, that is all that will be needed to correct the situation. It is the responsibility of every member in the body who is spiritual (Galatians 6:1) to address the sin they see. The purity of the body is every believer’s concern. This is more than simply a prayer of wishful thinking. It often will require loving confrontation. This responsibility of the individual can be neither side-stepped nor delegated to another.

The *provocation* of discipline is, according to Matthew 18:15, “*if your brother sins*” (many manuscripts add “*against you*”). The types of sin are not listed. The reference is kept general because it doesn’t really matter. All sin must be addressed. Of course, not all sin can or should be addressed by the elders. But if the body is working properly, most individuals will be dealing with their own sin, and from time to time it will become necessary for members to lovingly confront other members. Whenever any member of the body violates God’s Word and is unrepentant it is sin and must be confronted. All sin is against another brother either directly or indirectly. When someone punches me in the nose that is sinning against me directly and I must confront him in love, point out the sin, and call for repentance.

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However, all sins are not that direct though. Any sin that brings reproach on the assembly of God's people stains us all. Their leaven affects the whole lump, even if it is directly against no one in the body. To ignore such sin because it has touched no one directly is to misunderstand the impact of sin. Sin in the camp affected more than just Achan. All sin disrupts the unity of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:3) and robs others of the ministry that brother should have been able to offer.

The *prerequisites* of discipline are crucial to keep in focus. Before we can begin the process of going to our brother, there are certain bases we must cover with ourselves. When you become aware of a sinning brother, before the initial step of going to him in private, you must "*first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye*" (Matthew 7:5). You must first examine yourself to see if there is sinful motivation for wanting to confront your brother. If your heart is right, then you will grieve over the need to confront, not rejoice over it. Also, the driving force behind your confrontation will be your brother's good. The only reason to address the speck in your brother's eye is to benefit him, not yourself. The second issue to cover before beginning the process of discipline is an assessment of the root of the rebellion. The apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 identifies three different reasons why a brother might stray from the truth, each requiring a different response. He says, "*admonish the unruly, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak.*" Before confronting a sinning brother we must ask ourselves "is he unruly, is he faint-hearted, or is he weak?" The word "unruly" carries the idea of "out of line." If he has strayed from the prescribed life of Scripture, then such a brother is to be continually admonished (present imperative). If he is faint-hearted (feeble-minded or weak-headed, not knowing what to do), then he doesn't need admonishment, he needs encouragement. If he is weak (without power, knowing what to do but unable to do it) then he needs help (support). So how do you know which motivation is at the root of the problem? First, you must ask God for wisdom and insight. Second, you must err on the side of believing the best. You should approach your brother as if he is weak or faint-hearted, expecting to find a teachable, repentant heart. If he is unruly that will become evident by his response.

The process of discipline is clearly delineated in Matthew and the epistles.

STEP 1

Once you have examined your own heart and taken it to the Lord, and once you have looked at what might be behind their error, I am then to "*go and reprove him in private*" (literally "between you and him alone") (Matthew 18:15). Hopefully this is all that will be required. Jesus says, "*if he listens to you, you have won your brother.*" But if he is unrepentant, I must move to Step 2. If you speak of the matter to anyone else before him or beside him then you have sinned.

Step 1 can take place in two forms:

- A. The Sinning Believer is contacted by a Mature Believer strictly based on Matthew 18:15. If the Sinning Believer repents, Praise The Lord! No contact with church leadership is necessary.
- B. If the local church leadership is approached by a Brother or Sister in the Lord for the purpose of informing of a Sinning Believer's behavior yet he or she has not personally gone to the Sinning Believer, it is the leadership's responsibility to do the following:
 1. Lovingly instruct the approaching brother/sister concerning the Biblical restoration process. Have them read this publication as well as give specific assistance relative to the Prerequisites of Discipline and Step 1.
 2. Since the approaching Mature Believer has brought the issue to the church, it now becomes the church leadership's responsibility to expect the Mature Believer to initiate the correct reconciliation encounter. If no contact is made by an agreed upon date, then the church leadership shall contact the Mature Believer to determine if Step 1.B. has taken place. If the

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meeting has not taken place, the church leadership needs to determine why it has not and proceed to work toward Step 1 taking place by the Mature Believer (Serious re-consideration should be given to the validity of the Mature Believer's charge against the Sinning Believer and/or the Mature Believer's "maturity" based on their lack of follow through). It is possible, based on the seriousness of the charge and knowledge of the situation, that a now informed member of the church leadership carry out Step 1.

3. If, after the agreed upon date for Step 1 to have been completed has passed and church leadership repeatedly is unable to contact the Mature Believer, the church leadership will contact the Sinning Believer and say, "Brother/Sister, Mature Believer indicated to me that they were going to contact you on a very sensitive matter. Have they done so?" Clarify where needed and prayerfully proceed to setting up a meeting and proceed with Step 2.

STEP 2

Jesus says, "*but if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed*" (Matthew 18:16). Several issues must be clarified with this step. First, who qualifies as a witness? There is no indication that it is a matter for the elders at this point, but logic would suggest that perhaps it would be wise to involve an elder or trusted representative of the elders.

The apostle Paul, in Galatians 6:1 indicates that the only criteria for witnesses are: "*you who are spiritual*" (any spirit-filled believer), and by inference, one who is able to do it "*in a spirit of gentleness,*" and one who is willing to "*look to yourselves lest you too be tempted.*" James simply relegates the responsibility to "*brethren*" (James 5:19-20). A second issue to clarify is "what are they witnesses to?" Logically, it is not a requirement that they be witnesses to the sin, but rather, they are there to bear witness to the fact of this brother's unwillingness to repent. The focus of discipline is no longer the symptom (immorality, drinking, stealing, etc.), but now the focus shifts to the root sin (rebellion, a lack of repentance).

Here are the stages in properly handling Step 2:

- A. Step 2 should include the offended Mature Believer involved in Step 1. In addition, one or two who are mature and knowledgeable enough of the situation so as to be effective, as the Lord leads, in the upcoming meeting.
- B. If there is repentance, then counseling and appropriate accountability should be considered.
- C. If repentance is not apparent, contact with church leadership must follow and a certified letter will be sent, indicating that a lack of response by a specified date (approximately 1 week), would then send this matter before the entire council of Elders. The 3 individuals who approached the Sinning Believer in Step 2 should sign this letter.
- D. If repentance is not apparent following the certified letter by the Step 2 participants, the matter is brought before the Elders. They initiate another certified letter communicating that a lack of repentant response by specified date (i.e., the next Lord's Supper) will cause their name to be brought before the church body for the purpose of their prayer and for the church to urge for repentance and reconciliation (Step 3). The church must be educated as to how to go about making any contact so as to prevent an immature and harsh contact that would draw the sinning brother's attention away from his/her need to repent.

STEP 3

Jesus clarifies, "*And if he refuses to listen to them [the two or three witnesses], tell it to the church*" (Matthew 18:17). The appropriate time for this would be the Lord's Supper, and the brother

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should be notified in advance by registered mail. It is important to realize that this step is not for the purpose of public shame or excommunication. The focus is still the restoration of the sinning brother. Jesus makes it clear by the next statement (“*and if he refuses to listen even to the church*”) that the aim is for the brother to “*listen to the church.*” There should be time given for the brother to repent. It is important to identify that the central problem is not the initial sin, but the rebellion of unrepentance. It may be wise to give only limited information about what initiated the process of confrontation and to focus primarily on the believer’s response to being confronted about his sin. If the efforts of the entire church are unable to secure the brother’s repentance within an appointed time period (presumably until the next Lord’s Supper), then move to the fourth and final step.

- A. If there is no response to the Elders (Step 2.D.) by the next scheduled Lord’s Supper, then, in a non-dramatic yet serious manner, prior to the distribution of the elements of the covenant meal, the Sinning Believer’s name is shared with the membership present by a representative of the Elders (other than the Senior Pastor). Enough of the details are shared to communicate the seriousness of the situation and to also curtail unnecessary private discussion. Of course, the purpose of this step is to enlist the prayer of the body as well as their involvement, as the Lord leads, in calling the individual to repentance.
- B. A certified letter by the Elders is sent to the Sinning Believer explaining what has happened and what will happen in Step 4, if repentance is not seen by the next scheduled Lord’s Supper. Also included in this letter should be an explanation of what would happen if the Sinning Believer is repentant (counseling and accountability instituted and the congregation made aware of the joyful news).

STEP 4

Jesus tells us, “*and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer.*” Essentially Jesus says, treat him as an unbeliever. We don’t ignore him or ridicule him, but we also don’t fellowship with him. All our contact with him is aimed at ministering and drawing him into fellowship with God. This same concept is reiterated by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 3:6 where we read: “*Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us*”. His point is further clarified in 3:14-15 where we read: “*And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter [pre-canonized Scripture], take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame. And yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.*” Again, the brother should be notified of this action by registered letter.

- A. If there is no repentance, then, in similar manner as Step 3.A, share with congregation at the next scheduled Lord’s Supper, the heart of the action taken in Step 4 (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15).
- B. If there is repentance, then, in similar manner as Step 3.A, share with congregation at the next scheduled Lord’s supper with quiet & thankful rejoicing

KEY POINT:

Elder involvement should, by its very nature be a rarity since in essence it is a last resort

The Power

The *power* of discipline is illustrated in the verses of Matthew 18 that follow. There we are reminded that what we bind on earth (through rightly exercising church discipline) shall be as having been bound in heaven. We are not twisting the arm of God, but aligning ourselves with it. When we do, and if the sinning brother is still unrepentant, he is bound in his sins. God gives him over for the consequences of sin to do their dirty work. It is an interesting and unanswered question, but one must logically ask, “If we do not exercise church discipline Biblically and fully, are we not impeding the working of God and

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the operation of the consequences of sin in the life of the unrepentant?" We may actually hinder the process of restoration. God is in the midst of the working of believers in church discipline if they are working toward His goal of restoration that is spelled out in the preceding verses (Matthew 18:12-14). Here Jesus relates the heart of God in the parable of the lost sheep. The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine and seeks the one who is lost. That is the heart of God. The resulting implication from this parable to church leadership is that when a sheep strays, he takes priority over the ninety-nine who don't. It is also noteworthy that this passage on discipline is followed by Jesus' treatise on forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35). This attitude must pervade the whole process.

We must logically conclude that following God's design is the best hope we have of drawing back a sinning brother and also the means to protect the entire body from the stain of his sin. If we do not operate Biblically in this crucial area, we are acting as hirelings who tend the sheep when it is easy work, but run when the wolf comes to steal, kill, and destroy. If Satan, as a wolf, steals one of our sheep we must not stand idly by and say, "Oh well, there goes another one." It is a somber awareness when one admits, "But for the grace of God, that could be me." If I fell into sin—some trap of the enemy—I would be grateful for spiritual leaders who would pursue me, who would leave the ninety-nine to seek me out.

The Results Of How We Deal With Sin

When a church chooses to deal with sin in a Biblical manner two things result. First, the brother is called into account for his sin. We are the body of Christ, the embrace of Christ, the servanthood of Christ. We also put flesh and blood on His discipline. When we call a sinning brother to account, they see tangibly the attitude of God toward their sin. This is a great responsibility, for we must show His justice and holiness, tempered with His mercy and compassion. How do we do that? By never moving beyond their sin until they recognize it and repent of it, while being quick to forgive when they do. The Spirit of God within us doesn't bless us in one area of our lives while we cling to sin in another. He continually draws our attention back to our sin until it is dealt with, and our walk goes no further until we do. In the case of the unrepentant, who it would appear have seared their conscience enough to be content not to respond to the conviction of the Spirit, the church becomes a second line of defense. We express visibly and physically what God is already saying. This continual reminder, this lasting call to repentance, is the best hope we have for restoring a sinning brother.

Another resulting benefit of rightly exercising the discipline and restoration process is the purification of the church. "*A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough.*" By removing the leaven of a sinning, unrepentant brother we purify the whole body. Certainly we do not remove all sin from the body since "*we all stumble in many ways*" (James 3:2), but we make it clear to all that refusing to repent of sin is an unwelcome attitude. We make the body an uncomfortable place for the unrepentant. When I see someone else's sin dealt with in a serious manner, I take my own sin more seriously. When the body is free from rebellious believers, they stand out more clearly when they appear. If there is sin in the camp, all suffer the consequences. We see no example in Scripture of God overlooking the unrepentant and allowing them to continue in that state. We are called to the same commitment.

Conversely, if we do not deal fully and Biblically with sin in our body, it becomes comfortable and acceptable to remain in an unrepentant state. All are encouraged to take their own sin less seriously and the whole body becomes less holy, less like Christ. Our testimony is compromised and the name of Christ is defamed by our lack of respect for the holiness of God. As Paul quoted in Romans 2:24, "*The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles [unbelievers] because of you.*" We cannot afford not to deal seriously with sin in the body we bear responsibility for.

When Do The Elders Get Involved?

To summarize, not all discipline situations require the involvement of the elders of the church.

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Practically speaking, they should only be involved in two types of situations:

1. It is appropriate to involve the elders in a discipline situation when a properly confronted member of the body (as defined in Steps 1 through 4 of “the process of discipline”) is unrepentant about a Biblically defined sin they are guilty of, or
2. When a member of the body involved in a conflict with another person seeks Biblical/doctrinal advice.

In the case of an unrepentant member who has been properly confronted, although in some cases it may be appropriate to involve individual elders in Step 2, the elders as a whole do not get involved until Step 3, and then their involvement is in the form of binding discipline. In the case of members seeking Biblical/doctrinal advice, this may involve the elders as a whole or individual elders, and their involvement is in the form of non-binding counsel. To keep this system structurally practical and to keep it from absorbing the elders attention and usurping their ministry function, the elder board should in each instance appoint/designate an elder/staff to be the key player to track with the situation as their representative, operating in their authority and reporting back to them. Usually this person will already be identified by the situation, but when they are not, the elders should make such an appointment.