

The need for corrective church discipline.

On occasion a Christian will find himself¹ ensnared by sin through ignorance or willful disobedience, thus breaking Christian fellowship with other believers and a right relationship with Jesus Christ. It then becomes necessary for the church to actively seek the repentance and restoration of that Christian. Corrective church discipline is one means by which the church seeks to lovingly restore errant believers. The application of corrective church discipline involves believers as individuals, believers as a congregation, and the elders. Each believer, especially the elders as shepherds of the flock, love all in the flock and are held accountable by God for their spiritual welfare.

The purpose of corrective church discipline.

The purpose of corrective church discipline is the spiritual restoration of a fallen member and the consequent strengthening of the church and glorifying of the Lord. When a sinning believer is rebuked and he turns from his sin and is forgiven, he is won back to fellowship with the body and a right relationship is restored with its head, Jesus Christ. The purpose is not to throw people out of the church or to feed the self-righteous pride of those who administer the discipline. It is not to embarrass people or to exercise authority and power in some unbiblical manner.

In Matthew 18:15 [NASB], Jesus says, “And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.” The Greek word translated “won” was originally used for accumulating wealth in the sense of monetary commodities. Here it refers to the gaining back of something of value that is lost, namely, an erring individual. When an individual strays, a valuable treasure is lost, and the church should not be content until he or she is restored. The body of Christ is in the business of recovery (Gal. 6:1), and such is the purpose of church discipline.

Church discipline also maintains the welfare of the church by protecting the purity of the fellowship (1 Cor. 5:6), warning the assembly of the seriousness of sin (1 Tim. 5:20), and giving a testimony of righteousness to a watching world.

Church discipline is a potentially powerful motivation for a sinning individual to seek restoration through its demonstration of love and grace (Gal 6:1-2), but also is a demonstration of a correct perspective on sin – an intolerance.

¹Wherever a personal pronoun for a man or the word “brother” is used in this text, the intended application can be for a man or a woman.

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The process of corrective church discipline

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus sets forth the pattern for dealing with sin in the church: (1) person-to-person confront the errant believer about the sin; (2) take some witnesses; (3) tell the church; and (4) treat him as an outcast. RBC will apply this pattern utilizing the following process for corrective church discipline.

Pace of the process. The pace for proceeding through steps one-five of the process or completion of each step in the process will be based on an assessment of the following criteria.

- 1) The nature and seriousness of the sinful act.
- 2) The clarity of evidence that sin was committed (incontrovertible versus disputed, uncertain, inconclusive, or ambiguous)
- 3) The sinning individual's acknowledgement that he has committed the sin.
- 4) The sinning individual demonstrates either:
 - a) a change of heart by demonstrating repentance for the sin.
 - b) a commitment to work towards a change of heart, such as through Christian or Biblical counseling.
- 5) The awareness of the sinful act within the congregation and the general public.

During step four, the elders may seek help in making their assessments of these criteria by asking for feedback from other individuals in the congregation that have recently interacted with the sinning individual.

Jesus' teaching in Mathew 18:12-17 implies a measured and deliberate pace, possibly even slow, dependent on the sin and the sinner. Paul encourages patience in admonishment in 1 Thessalonians 3:14. However, Paul gives examples in Titus 3:10-11 and 1 Corinthians 5 of situations where he gave instruction for a more rapid pace.

Step One (Matt. 18:15). The process of corrective church discipline begins on an individual level. Jesus said, "And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private" (v. 15a). Here, an individual believer is to go to a sinning individual privately and confront him in a spirit of humility and gentleness. This confrontation involves demonstrating a concern for the sinning individual and clearly exposing his sin so that he is aware of it and calling him to repentance. If the sinning individual repents in response to the private confrontation, that individual is forgiven and restored (v. 15b).

In most cases, the application of discipline will follow all of the steps in the process. However, the elders may decide for the process to skip step one and start with step two or four in some cases. This determination could apply in the case where an individual seeks the advice of the elders before doing step one and the elders determine the pace of the process should proceed more rapidly based on an assessment of the criteria for pace (see discussion of Pace of the process).

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Step Two (Matt. 18:16). If the sinning individual refuses to listen to the one who has rebuked him privately, the next step in the discipline process is for the same individual to take one or more believers along to confront him 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 to confirm if the erring believer has truly sinned or is continuing to sin and acknowledges a sin was committed. Then, if so, they are to confirm that the sinning individual is not only properly rebuked but, in addition, to confirm if the individual has or has not repented. Jesus takes this phrase from Deuteronomy 19, which in context is meant to protect people against false accusations. Deuteronomy in fact calls for a “thorough investigation” whenever there’s any doubt about the crime (Deut. 19:18).

The presence of additional witnesses is as much a protection for the one being approached as it is for the one approaching. After all, a biased person could erroneously say, “Well, I tried to confront him, but he’s impenitent.” It would be presumptuous to think that one person could make that ultimate determination, especially if he was the one who had been sinned against. The witnesses need to confirm whether there is a heart of repentance or one of indifference or rejection. Such a report provides the basis for further action because the situation has been verified beyond the report of one individual.

At this point, it should be hoped that the one or two who are brought along to confront the sinner will not have to become public witnesses against him before the rest of the church. Ideally, their added rebuke will be sufficient to induce a change of heart in the offending individual that the initial rebuke did not cause. If this change of heart does occur, that individual is forgiven and restored, and the matter is dropped.

Step Three (Matt. 18:17a). If the sinning individual refuses to listen and respond to the confrontation of the multiple witnesses by repentance after a period of time, those witnesses are then to tell it to the church (v. 17a). Telling it to the church in this step is done by bringing the matter to the attention of the elders and seeking their direct involvement in the process.

Step Four (Matt. 18:16). Following receipt of the testimony of all of the previous witnesses that bring the matter to the elders, an elder will take one or more believers along to confront the sinning individual.

- a. The elders will maintain a record of when they receive this testimony.
- b. The purpose of this confrontation is for the elders to be absolutely certain the erring believer has truly sinned or is continuing to sin; whether the individual acknowledges a sin was committed; and, whether he has refused to repent when appropriately confronted. The elders may determine to conduct this confrontation through one or more meetings with the sinning individual.

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- c. The elders will make known publicly during this step, at least to the members, the appropriate information about the individual's sin and refusal to repent. The purpose of making the information known publicly is to clearly indicate to the congregation that they are to pursue the person aggressively and plead with him to repent before the next step becomes necessary. That crucial and potent procedure may draw the sinner to repentance and obedience. If repentance does take place, the sinning believer is forgiven and restored. The determination to suspend the membership of the sinning individual will take place during this step as a formal warning. The timing of this determination is up to the elders and may or may not precede the initial public presentation of the individual's sin and refusal to repent.
- d. If the sinning individual continues to be unrepentant for his sin after the confrontation(s) in this step, the elders will deliver in writing to the sinning individual a notification letter with an enumeration of the sins for which they are being confronted and a warning to the individual that the step of termination of church membership as a matter of discipline will be taken if they have not received evidence of repentance by a specific date.

Step Five. When the date in the notification letter has passed and if the sinning individual has not provided evidence of his repentance, the elders will present to the members a motion to terminate the membership of the sinning individual as a matter of church discipline. A written ballot will be used for the vote on the motion. The results of the vote will be presented either as approved or disapproved.

Step Six (Matt. 18:17b). If the member's approve termination of the membership of the sinning individual, the final step in the process of church discipline is exclusion. If a sinning believer refuses to listen even to the church, he is to be excluded from all fellowship with them. Jesus said, "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer" (v. 17b). The term "Gentile" was primarily used of non-Jews who held to their traditional paganism and had no part in the covenant, worship, or social life of the Jews. On the other hand, a "tax-gatherer" was an outcast from the Jews by choice, having become a traitor to his own people. Jesus' use of these terms doesn't mean that the church is to treat these people badly. It simply means that when a professing believer refuses to repent, the church is to treat him as if he were outside of the fellowship. They are not to let him associate and participate in the blessings and benefits of the Christian fellowship.

When a man in the Corinthian church refused to forsake an incestuous relationship with his stepmother, the apostle Paul commanded that the man be removed from their midst (1 Cor. 5:13). The believers there were not even to share a meal with him (1 Cor. 5:11), for dining with someone was symbolic of a hospitable and cordial fellowship. The one who is persistently unrepentant is to be totally excluded from the fellowship of the church and treated like an outcast, not a brother. The sinning individual must not be given indications that they are considered to be a believer, unless they repent. An objective is to remove him as a detrimental influence from the fellowship of the church and then to regard him as an evangelistic prospect rather than as a brother. The intent

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is not to shun him completely but still lovingly pursue reconciliation by the sinning individual.

The command not to have fellowship with the unrepentant individual does include even social interaction, but does not exclude all contact. When there is an opportunity to admonish him and try to call him back, the opportunity should be taken. In fact, such opportunities should be sought. But the contact should be for the purpose of admonishment and restoration and no other. Believers must continue to show grace to the sinning individual through gentleness, kindness, and goodness in our interactions with that individual. However, it should be made clear that the offering of this grace is to demonstrate God's love for the individual and desire for restoration through repentance.

As far as the welfare of the member is concerned, the purpose of the exclusion is not to punish but to awaken, and it must therefore be done in humble love and never in a spirit of self-righteous superiority (2 Thess. 3:15).

When a church has done everything it can to bring a sinning member back to purity of life, but is unsuccessful, that individual is to be left to his sin and his shame. If he is truly a Christian, God will not cast him away, but He may allow him to sink still deeper before he becomes desperate enough to turn from his sin.

However, even after all of the steps of church discipline have been applied, the goal remains the spiritual restoration of the fallen member and the consequent strengthening of the church and glorifying of the Lord.