

Position Paper: Church Discipline

Primary Passages

“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. 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. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 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.’ Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.’ (Matt 18:15-21)

Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.... If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother (2 Thess 3:6, 14-15).

When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord (1 Cor 5:4-5).

Specifically for leadership: Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure. (No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.) The sins of some men are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden (1 Tim 5:19-25).¹

Definition

The church is a community, the body and bride of Christ. God’s goal for us is to grow into the likeness of His Son and to present us holy and blameless before him (Eph 1:4). Individually and corporately, we are to reflect God to the world.

Church discipline is the process by which brothers and sisters in the Lord seek to reconcile with each other and restore their relationships. If reconciliation fails, the unrepentant is disciplined by the church as a whole. When an individual sins, it’s effects eventually permeate the entire body and damages our witness to the world.

¹ Secondary verses. By rejecting this [faith and a good conscience], some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme (1 Tim 1:19-20).

Who is Subject to the Reconciliation Process?

1. All members of the local church have agreed to this process in their acceptance of the church by-laws.
2. All people who consider _____ their home church, as expressed by their regular attendance and/or permanent name tag.
3. Because the church is the family of God universal, all followers of Jesus Christ fall under the same requirements of reconciliation, restoration, and discipline. If a brother or sister has sinned against you, you must deal with them (if at all possible) in the biblically-prescribed method (see below). However, the final stage of social ostracism is not effective if the offending person no longer worships at _____ and may not need to be pursued, except possibly to notify the unrepentant's new church that they are under church discipline.

Why do We Pursue this Process?

1. All believers are called to live at peace with each other. If sin against one another is ignored, there can be no true reconciliation or peace.²
2. As fully-devoted disciples we are commanded to hate sin and pursue holiness. While we are also to love one another and extend grace, our hatred of sin and desire for holiness are as equally significant, and in fact one cannot exist without the other.³
3. To call sinners to the biblical standard for their own spiritual health and maturing.⁴
4. For the instruction and spiritual health of the church as a whole.⁵

2 Better is open rebuke than hidden love (Prov 27:5)

3 Depart from me, you evildoers, that I may keep the commandments of my God (Ps 119:115). He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him (Eph 1:4). ... so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph 5:27).

4 A fool spurns his father's discipline, but whoever heeds correction shows prudence (Prov 15:5, NIV). The Lord is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous (Prov 15:29). I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children (1 Cor 4:14). Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head; let my head not refuse it. Yet my prayer is continually against their evil deeds. (Ps 141:5). My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins (James 5:19-20). And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all (1 Thess 5:14). As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death (2 Cor 7:9-10). Cf. Pr 17:10; Heb 12:1-11

5 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph 5:27). Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals" (1 Cor 15:33). They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach (Titus 1:11). Your boasting is not good. 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 (1 Cor 5:6-7). Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God (2 Cor 7:1). Cf. Col 3:16.

5. As a deterrent to further sin.⁶
5. The cause of Christ is hampered in our community when holiness is not our hallmark.⁷
6. Church discipline is biblically mandated and shown by example; to not do it, is to sin.⁸
7. Ultimately, God is glorified in our obedience.⁹

What Sins Fall Under this Process?

1. Anything that is contrary to the Membership Covenant.
2. Consistent, willful sinning.
3. Significant moral sin in clear contradiction of biblical teaching (e.g., sexual sins).
4. Denial of central doctrines contained in the church's statement of faith (e.g., denial of the infallibility of the Bible, existence of a personal God, Trinity, full humanity and divinity of Christ, sinful state of unregenerate man, salvation by faith, call to holiness, Christ's return).¹⁰

⁶ As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear (1 Tim 5:20).

⁷ You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven (Matt 5:13-16). By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:35). Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil (of Elders, 1 Tim 3:7). And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed (2 Pet 2:2). By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother (1 John 3:10). Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation (1 Pet 2:12). Cf. Acts 5:1-14; Rom 2:24

⁸ Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, "I repent," you must forgive him (Luke 17:3). Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness (Gal 6:1). This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth (Titus 1:14-14). Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them (Eph 5:11). Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4). "Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them," says the Lord, "and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you" (2 Cor 6:17).

⁹ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven (Matt 5:16). By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples (John 15:8). May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 15:5-6). So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31; cf. Eph 3:21).

¹⁰ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:8). If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting (2 John 10). But I have *this* against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit *acts of immorality* and eat things sacrificed to idols (Revelation 2:20).

5. Sins that over time are especially disruptive of the church body (e.g., gossip, slander, critical or divisive spirit, anger).¹¹
6. Sins that over time will bring the cause of Christ into disrepute.

What is the Goal of the Process?

1. The initial goal is to clarify the issue, listening to the other person, making sure the information is correct, and confirming that there is a problem.
2. Explanation and confrontation of sin, repentance and confession of sin, acceptance of the confession, and restoration of the relationship.
3. If the sin is against the body, or if the repercussions of the sin have affected the body, public confession by those involved.

Whose Responsibility is the Process?

1. Whether you have sinned against a brother, or a brother has sinned against you, it is your responsibility to pursue reconciliation and restoration. This is to be done one-on-one and is always the first step. There is no place for anger to grow, gossip and slander to gain ground, emotional walls to be built, and fellowship broken.
2. When individuals are not able to come to reconciliation, then the Elders of church will become involved.

What is the Actual Process?

1. A one-on-one meeting between the two parties to clarify the issue (as above).
2. A two-on-one meeting. The second person needs to be someone known by both parties, is mature in his/her faith, and can be objective.
3. If the second person is not an elder, a third two-on-one meeting is necessary, with the third person being an elder.
4. If reconciliation is still not accomplished, then both parties are to be brought before the elder board. If the Elders agree that the person is at fault and refuses to repent and be reconciled, the person is to be removed from any leadership or ministry position in which he/she is serving, and their membership placed on probation.

This entire process is to be permeated with love and grace as well as a hatred of sin and firm adherence to the truth.

What to do When the Reconciliation is not Met

1. Removal from church fellowship (social ostracism). Individuals are still encouraged to pray for the person and to meet with them, but only for reconciliation.

Option 1: A boxed area on the inside of the church bulletin will contain this person's name. Attenders will recognize that when a name appears, it means the elders have been

¹¹ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3). And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body (Col 3:15; cf. 1 Thess).

involved in the process, reconciliation has not been achieved, and the person is to be socially set apart..

Option 2: An announcement will be made from the pulpit that a special meeting of members of the church who know the person—who will be named by name—to meet immediately after the church service. In that service

Attendees are free to ask Elders the general nature of the offense and to receive confirmation that this process has been followed. Attendees are also asked to trust the Elders and not ask for confidential details.

When reconciliation is accomplished, the name will be published in the same box with the title: Restored.

2. If reconciliation is not accomplished, the person is to be removed from church participation. The person is to be informed that they may not enter the church building or grounds, and the Elders are to enforce the decision.
3. If in a timely manner reconciliation is not accomplished, the person is to be removed from church membership.

What is the Time-frame for the Process?

1. Personal reconciliation is to begin immediately, before the sun sets.¹²
2. When it becomes clear to the individuals involved that the process is not moving toward reconciliation, then the matter is to be brought to the attention of the elders.
3. When the matter becomes public and begins to have an effect on other members.

What is the Appeal Process?

1. A member has the right to appeal their dismissal by the Council of Elders to the membership at a regularly convened business meeting of the Church. By doing so, the member is granting the Council of Elders the right to publicly state the reason(s) for removal, and the member has the opportunity to explain himself.

¹² Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil (Ephesians 4:26-27).