



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

CHURCH DISCIPLINE GUIDELINES

Theology, Philosophy, and Practice

RATIFIED 2012



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For excellent and more complete studies on this subject, see (1) A Guide to Church Discipline, by Carl Laney, Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1985, and (2) Healing the Wounded, The Costly Love of Church Discipline, by John White and Ken Blue, Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1985.



DISCIPLINE IN LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL

In the beginning, man and woman were created by God for His glory and for our greatest joy. By design, our greatest delight and truest satisfaction were to be found in trusting and treasuring God.

Though man was originally created good, the Scriptures reveal that he eventually and willingly rebelled against his Creator. Therefore, he has ever since suffered the consequences, condemnation and curses of what has been called “the fall.” This fall did not merely change mankind’s environment, but also his very essence. By this one original sin, the nature of humanity was altered, and we became sinners, natural enemies of God, predisposed to hate and rebel against Him. We were enslaved to the tyranny of sin and the death which it brings, and we were exposed to the just wrath of God.

Though man suppressed and exchanged true worship of the Creator for praise of created things, God’s plans to unite His glory and our joy were not thwarted at the fall. Rather, He has been patiently and purposefully working to restore what was broken. This restoration has been most clearly and fully revealed through the person and work of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. In the perfect obedience of His life, His death for our sins, and His resurrection, Christ introduced reconciliation into the world. Through treasuring and trusting in His finished work, we once again have relationship with our Creator.

Though we who believe have experienced true redemption and reconciliation, the fullness of our hope awaits us in the future. We are longing for the promise of Christ’s return, our resurrection and the restoration of creation. Until then, we still struggle with the residue of our old self, the flesh. This struggle is not to be lived out alone, but rather in the context of community, particularly the local church. We are called by God to watch out for ourselves and those whom we love lest we be enticed by the deceitful promises of sin. We will never truly love discipline until we hate sin.

R.C. Sproul writes, “The church is called not only to a ministry of reconciliation, but a ministry of nurture to those within her gates. Part of that nurture includes church discipline . . .”¹ The idea of church discipline is totally consistent with the basic purposes of the church—evangelism and edification. Evangelism ministers to those outside the church who are in bondage to sin to bring them to faith in Christ where the transformation process begins. The edification process is designed to build up believers so they can be conformed to the image and character of Christ. Church discipline as a part of the edification process

¹ R. C. Sproul, *In Search of Dignity*, Regal Books, 1983, p. 182.

ministers to those within the body of Christ who are dominated by some area of sin so they can experience liberation from its power through fellowship with Christ.

How then do we define church discipline? “Church discipline may be broadly defined as the confrontive and corrective measures taken by an individual, church leaders, or the congregation regarding a matter of sin in the life of a believer.”²

“Church discipline is not a group of ‘pious policemen’ out to catch a criminal. Rather, it is a group of brokenhearted brothers and sisters seeking to restore and erring member of the family.”³

Discipline in the church is not punishment. It is discipline and discipline is designed to train and restore.

² Carl Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline*, Bethany House Publishers, p. 14.

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: New Testament*, p. 586.



LOVE DEMANDS DISCIPLINE

On a personal level, love for the Lord demands a response in which the desires of the flesh are slowly and methodically put to death. On the corporate level, love for the Lord and for His church requires a response in which sin is dealt with as God has intended. What loving parent would allow their child to play with fire? Would we expect anything different from our heavenly Father?

Colossians 1:28-29 Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all His energy that He powerfully works within me.

From this passage in Colossians we see that discipleship and the discipline through which it occurs is defined as maturity in Christ. This is accomplished primarily through teaching and warning. We might divide these two aspects of discipleship into two necessary components: those which are **FORMATIVE** and those which are **RESTORATIVE**. Formative discipline involves teaching, preaching, prayer, study, fasting and various other forms of engagement or abstinence to correct tendencies toward committing sins or omitting responsibilities in the Christian life. Restorative discipline occurs in the context of community and involves warnings, rebukes, exhortation and correction intending to prevent or to correct explicitly sinful or foolish expressions within the church. Both are a means of training us toward our goal of maturity in Christ. Neither personal formative discipline nor corporate restorative discipline are easy or necessarily enjoyable at the time. However, both are necessary for us to cultivate holiness. We must be trained by discipline in order to grow into maturity.

The Scriptures are full of wisdom regarding discipline. The writer of Hebrews teaches us that God's children are disciplined by Him in one form or another. Sometimes He sends tribulation and persecution or removes worldly comforts to foster humility, holiness and faith in us. Sometimes He disciplines through the work of the community of faith. It is this context of corporate discipline in the local church body with which this document is concerned. Therefore, the term "church discipline" will include the various steps of the community of faith coming alongside a professing believer to exhort, encourage, warn and rebuke him in loving hope for his or her restoration and movement toward Christian maturity.

Our hope, however, is that formative discipline through the work of the Holy Spirit will keep us from the need for the restorative forms. Regardless of the form, we will certainly be disciplined and God will use it to accomplish His loving purposes.

Hebrews 12:5-11 and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges

every son whom he receives." It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

An Individual Calling

A significant part of the Christian life calls for the believer to be intentional, disciplined and self-controlled in seeking and submitting to the Lord through personal devotion and practice (cf. Galatians 5:22-23; 2 Timothy 1:7). However, our flesh is opposed to our desire for holiness (Galatians 5:16-17), and we must therefore be diligent to fight the flesh and walk by the Spirit (Romans 8:12-14) as children of God. By His grace, we can grow in our ability to live by faith through the Spirit's sanctifying work (1 Peter 1:2) as we relate to God and others through the realities of life.

A Corporate Calling

Given the deceitfulness of sin, all of us need the most basic level of church discipline that involves our brothers and sisters speaking truth in love to us (Ephesians 4:15, 29) because we are often blind to our own sinfulness (cf. Matthew 7:3-5). We need one another to believe and live out the gospel—this is God's design. Every church member is called to exercise their individual gifts to build up the body in love (1 Corinthians 12). Every member is called to labor and struggle with all energy to help one another in the church to grow in conformity to Christ (cf. Colossians 1:28-29).

Spiritual Warfare

Our call to live out the gospel takes place within the realm of spiritual warfare. The kingdom of evil is ever-present and always working against the kingdom of God. The difficulties we face in life are ultimately "not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). Our "adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8) and seeks to keep us living in fear and not by faith. Therefore, we need to love one another through encouragement, rebuke and correction since we are all prone to wander from our God.



CONTEXT OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

We must be cautious not to engage in the disciplinary process in situations where the issue is not explicitly sinful or foolish behavior. This distinction between dealing with issues of preference and those of sin is made explicit in the following passages:

Romans 14:10 But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this--not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.

1 Corinthians 5:9-13 I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler--not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.

Notice the seeming contradiction in Paul's admonitions. In Romans 14, Paul writes that we should not judge our brothers. In 1 Corinthians 5, he writes that we should judge our brothers. Given that Scripture is not self-contradictory, we know that Paul's inspired interpretation of events must reflect differing circumstances.

The contexts of both passages clearly indicate that the situations are quite distinct. Romans 14 is dealing with principles of preference while 1 Corinthians 5 is dealing with that which has been clearly revealed as sin. This distinction must be maintained in the way in which individuals and churches interpret and apply Scripture today. Once again, the issues with which this document will be concerned are those of sin, not preference or conscience.⁴ We are called to judge objective actions, not subjective attitudes and motivations. The latter is for the Lord to weigh and measure.

⁴ An example to help flesh this out involves alcohol. Nowhere in the Scriptures is alcohol consumption deemed inherently sinful. Like the discussion of Romans 14, it is a matter of personal preference and conviction. As such, church discipline cannot and will not be enacted in the case of a believer who chooses to have an alcoholic beverage. However, if this believer drinks to the point of drunkenness, then the matter is no longer one of conscience, but is a clear violation of Scripture (Ephesians 5:18; 1 Corinthians 5:11; et al) and will therefore be dealt with accordingly.



PURPOSE OF DISCIPLINE

Why should the church engage in corporate discipline? Five reasons stand out as most pertinent:

1. We love the Lord
2. We love our members
3. We love His church
4. We love non-believers
5. We love the Scriptures

1

We love the Lord

Our God is a holy God whose eyes can look on no evil (Habakkuk 1:13). Though none of us will fully comprehend the Lord this side of glory, we recognize that our love for Him is informed by our understanding of who He is. We cannot love Him Whom we do not know. Part of the call to love God is to abhor that which is opposed to Him. Failure to fully appreciate the utter horror of sin is evidence of an incomplete understanding of the holiness of God.

Sin is a horrid thing. Through just one sin death, depravity, corruption and disease have reigned upon the earth for thousands of years. It always has devastating effects and all of us constantly live in that awareness.

As believers, we have great hope in no longer being enslaved to sin or its curse. We have been granted liberty through the free gift of God's grace. However, this liberty does not grant us license to sin. Rather, those who have tasted of the grace of God should be all the more adamant to oppose the sinful flesh. While we recognize that we will not see perfection until Christ returns, such acknowledgment should not lull us into an apathetic view of sin. It is still horrid and grotesque and has no place in the life of the believer.

The church must exhibit a healthy view of the holiness of God and our responsibility to flee from our natural passions and desires. We would do well to remember the many admonitions of Hebrews:

2:1 For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.

3:12 *Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.*

4:1, 11 *Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it...Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience.*

10:26-31 *For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay" And again, "The Lord will judge His people." It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

We do not believe that any true believer can ultimately fall away from God's grace. However, we must also confess that there exists the very real possibility that some will find false assurance of salvation. This is surely terrifying.

These texts are not intended to relegate believers to perpetual fear, but rather to rouse the sluggish and undisciplined from their slumber. If a so-called believer is engaged in willful, persistent and unrepentant sin, the Scriptures say that his honest expectation should be judgment and punishment. That does not mean that he will receive such, for all true believers will ultimately persevere, but it does mean that he or she has no evidence upon which to base his or her claims of safety. Unrepentant sin in the believer must be dealt with by repentance. Failure to repent might be evidence of an unregenerate heart which is unable to turn from sin (Hebrews 12:15-17).

Love for God demands the discipline of holiness.

2

We love our members

The motivation behind church discipline should always be the hope of the restoration of the wayward brother or sister. Discipline is not the end, but rather is the means to the expected end of repentance and reconciliation in the life of the true believer.

James 5:19-20 *My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this:*

Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

In loving our brethren, we must remember to allow the Scriptures to define the means and manners of our love. While our culture might tell us that acceptance is love, the Scriptures are clear that true love calls to holiness and life through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

1 John 5:2 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments.

Attempting to love in a way that neglects Scripture not only evidences a lack of faith in Scripture and the Author of such Scripture, but also an ignorance as to the meaning of genuine love for the brother or sister. We must love in a way that is consistent with the biblical revelation. The Lord created the method of church discipline as His intended means of sanctifying the church and her individual members. This is how He intends to sanctify His people and therefore failure on our part to carry out His desires is decidedly unloving.

Love for our members demands that we engage in discipline for their good and not let them sit idly in their sin and pretend as if nothing is wrong.

3

We love His church

Not only are we called to love our individual members, but also to love the whole assembly who gather together in the name of the Lord. To allow for unrepentant and persistent sin to leaven the congregation should certainly be a concern which drives and informs our decisions in church discipline.

Church discipline is vital to the purity of the local body and its protection from moral decay and impure doctrinal influences. Why? Because a little leaven leavens the entire lump (1 Cor. 5:6-7). This is the “rotten apple” problem or the “snowball” effect.

An illustration of this is the Corinthian church which showed a lack of concern for purity. They neglected the responsibility to discipline and suffered as a result. Their insensitivity to one moral issue may have led to their compromise on other issues. Laney writes, “The Corinthians engaged in lawsuits, misused their liberty, profaned the Lord’s Supper, neglected the primacy of love, failed to regulate the use of their gifts, and questioned the resurrection.” Failure in church discipline in Corinth could be compared to a snowball tumbling downhill.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. And you are

arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. 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.

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. 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.

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

Sin in the life of the church grieves the person of the Holy Spirit and quenches His power. If sin remains unchecked by the loving application of church discipline in a body of believers, the Holy Spirit must abandon such a church to its own carnal resources. The unavoidable result will be the loss of the Lord's blessing until the sin is dealt with.

The defeat of Israel because of the sin of Achan in Joshua 7 illustrates the principle. This is just as true for the church today, especially when we know certain things exist but ignore them or simply look the other way because it is difficult to deal with or because it involves one of our friends and we do not want to risk causing problems in the relationship.

Love for the church demands that we discipline ourselves for the sake of purity and power.

4

We love non-believers

Those who profess belief in Christ and yet continue in unrepentant sin misrepresent the nature of grace and the very faith that they claim. We want non-believers to know that the Christian faith does not merely gloss over hypocrisy and pretending. We take seriously the calls of our Lord.

Romans 6:1-4 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

5

We love the Scriptures

As we will discuss in the following sections, the Lord has specifically revealed the method through which the church is expected to deal with sin in its body. Failing to obey God's commands is sin. We must be careful lest we ourselves fall into sin merely by allowing others to engage in it.

Psalms 119:9-16 How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word. With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes! With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth. In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.

2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

Love for the Scriptures demands that we discipline in accordance with its instructions.

MEMBERSHIP COMMITMENT PROVISIONS



Part of the membership process at Village Bible Church includes the signing of our membership commitments. This covenant outlines the respective responsibilities of elders and members toward the church body. Particularly relevant are the following responsibilities:

Elders' covenant:

I will lovingly exercise discipline when necessary, for the glory of God, the good of the one disciplined and the health of the church as a whole. I will remember the love God shows for me in His discipline and correction as I seek to lovingly carry out the discipline and correction of God's people in this local church.

Members' covenant:

I will submit to the church's discipline upon myself and lovingly assume my responsibility to participate in the discipline of other members, as taught in Scripture.

Given that these responsibilities in the Scriptures are applicable to all believers, Village Bible Church will reserve the right to exercise loving discipline outside of its official membership for those who regularly attend. The further a person is outside of the fold, the less biblical responsibility we will feel toward engaging them.



PRACTICE OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

The Manner of Church Discipline

Village Bible Church believes that the best way to deal with sin and love the sinner is through the means revealed in Scripture. Our desire to obey the Lord thus necessitates that we follow His Word. Thus:

1. Discipline must be done by those who are spiritual, truly walking by the Holy Spirit and growing in the Lord (Gal. 6:1).
2. Discipline must be done in a spirit of humility, gentleness and patience, looking to ourselves lest we too be tempted (Gal. 6:1-2; 2 Tim. 2:24-25).
3. Discipline must be done without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality (1 Tim. 5:21).
4. Those who walk disorderly are to be admonished, warned, and appealed to in love (1 Thess. 5:14-15; 1 Tim. 5:1-2; Eph. 4:15; 2 Tim. 4:2). This admonishing, is not restricted to church leaders, but may be done by any person in the body with another if that person is Spirit controlled and spiritually minded (cf. 1 Thess. 5:14 with Gal. 6:1).
5. If there is no response in repentance and obedience, then the sinning believer is to be rebuked publicly and members of the body are to withhold fellowship through the process and procedure of group disapproval and social ostracism as prescribed in the next section, Procedures for Church Discipline below (2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15; Tit. 3:10; 1 Tim. 5:20). This action has a two-fold objective:
 - It is to indicate to the offender that his/her action has dishonored the Lord and has caused a rupture in the harmony of the body. The goal is always restoration and the person is still to be counted as a brother (2 Thess. 3:14-15).
 - It is to create fear in the rest of the flock as a warning against sin (1 Tim. 5:20).
6. If there is still no response in repentance and obedience, the church is to apply the procedures of excommunication as directed in Matthew 18:17.

Several examples of church discipline are found in Scripture. The Corinthian believers were to be “gathered together” in order to take action against the offending brother (1 Cor. 5:4-5; Rom. 16:17; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; Phil. 3:17-19).

This is defined by Paul as “punishment inflicted by the majority” (2 Cor. 2:6). As a protective measure, we also find that the whole church in Rome and in

Thessalonica were to take action with regard to the unruly and schismatic, not just a few (2 Thess. 3:6-15; Rom. 16:17).

7. Finally, discipline in the name of our Lord always includes a readiness to forgive. The many or majority who discipline must also be ready and eager to forgive, comfort, and reaffirm their love to the sinning person (2 Cor. 2:6-8). (See Procedures for Church Discipline below.)

Reasons for Church Discipline

In church discipline we must exercise extreme care. Scripture does not warrant the exercise of discipline for an individual's or a church's taboos or pet peeves—the “dirty dozen” or the “nasty nine.” Scripture, not our opinions or dislikes, must be the guide for what is sin. Further, we must not become hypercritical or “speck inspectors.”

1. General Causes: Disorderly conduct, conduct clearly out of line with the prescribed commands of Scripture and which negatively impacts the testimony and unity of the church (2 Thess. 3:6-15).
2. Specific Causes:
 - Difficulties between members (Matt. 18:15-17).
 - Divisive or factious people causing divisions in the church (Rom. 16:17-18; Titus 3:9-11).
 - Immoral conduct; sins of the type mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5 such as incest, immorality, covetousness, idolatry, abusive speech, drunkenness, swindling, or idle busybodies who refuse to work and run around spreading dissension (1 Cor. 5:1, 11; 2 Thess. 3:10-15).
 - False teaching; erroneous teaching and views which concern the fundamentals of the faith and not lesser differences of interpretation (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:17-18; also implied in Rev. 2:14-16; Phil. 3:2-3, 15-19; Rom. 16:17-18).

The key concerns that guide us in this are: (a) the holy character of God, (b) the testimony of the flock, (c) the effect upon the unity and purity of the flock, and (d) the edification and restoration of the individual.

PROCEDURES OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE



The scriptural procedure is clear and specific steps are prescribed as follows:

Cautions

If you see the offense or you have accurate knowledge of the sin(s), please note these cautions:

- Be sure it is an offense which calls for discipline and not merely one of our pet peeves. Again, the Word must be our criterion.
- Remember how we too have sinned in the past and heed the warnings of Galatians 6:1.
- Bring the matter before the Lord in prayer before the confrontation takes place (1 Sam. 8:6).
- Don't procrastinate. The longer the delay, the more difficult the condition can become. Remember the consequences listed above.
- Don't gossip or even talk to others about it in the sense of Matthew 18:16 until you have talked to the sinning believer privately. We must guard and protect the person and the flock from rumors and a slanderous tongue (Prov. 6:19b; 10:19; 11:13; 18:8, 21; 20:19).

First Step

First, seek private correction and/or reconciliation with the offender (Matt. 18:15). In Matthew 18:15 many manuscripts have "and if your brother sins *against you*, go and reprove him in private."

There has been no little debate as to whether the words "against you" are part of the original manuscripts. The words "against me" in verse 21 may have led a scribe or copyist to personalize the matter in verse 15. Or, one could argue the omission was deliberate in order to generalize the passage. While some important manuscript tradition lacks the words "against you," many feel there is good evidence for their originality. First, the words, "reprove him in private," and second, the question of Peter in verse 21 about forgiving a brother who sins "against me" suggests their inclusion.

Whether the words "against you" were in the original text or not, Galatians 6:1 teaches that believers have a responsibility to confront sin in general in the life of other believers and not just when it is an offense against one's person. It would seem, then that there is a two-fold application:

1. When the problem involves one believer sinning against another, there are two problems that need to be taken care of: reconciliation and restoration (Matt. 5:23-24).
2. When the problem involves a believer overcome in or by some sin, as was the case in Galatians 6:1, the need is restoration.

Matthew 18:16-17 should not be limited to the problem of one believer sinning against another in view of Galatians 6:1. So, the one offended or who recognizes the offense or sin is to go privately and try to rectify the problem.

Please note these guidelines:

1. Begin by expressing your genuine appreciation for the person and their good qualities to show you are genuinely concerned about their welfare. Then and only then bring up the matter which is of concern.
2. In some situations the sin is apparent and there is no question, but we must allow for the possibility that we have misjudged or have wrong information. We must listen to the other person's side of the story and seek the facts in the interest of truth and fairness.
3. If the person fails to respond, warn them that, according to the instructions of Scripture (Matt. 18:16), you will have to get others as witnesses and return with them to deal with the problem.

Second Step

If the first step fails, take witnesses to strengthen the effect of the discipline, preferably spiritual leaders, so that if it has to be brought before the whole church it can be firmly proven and established (Matt. 18:16-17; 1 Tim. 5:19). The aid of church leadership should be sought if the problem involves an offense that is against the whole body or if it is a threat to the unity of the body.

These initial contacts, private and with witnesses, provide opportunity for loving admonition, correction, and forgiveness. On the other hand, if these first steps do not produce results, it constitutes a warning that further action will be taken and provides occasion for serious rebuke (2 Tim. 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; Titus 2:15; 3:10).

Third and Fourth Steps

If the second step fails, seek reconciliation and restoration through the whole body. If further action is necessary, it is to be taken before the whole church (2 Thess. 3:14-15; Matt. 18:17; 1 Tim. 5:20).

This action appears to fall into two stages when we combine 2 Thessalonians 3:14 and 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 with Matthew 18:17.

1. The body is to exercise group disapproval by way of social ostracism (refusal to have fellowship).

2. If this doesn't work, the local body of believers is to exercise excommunication: removal from church membership, loss of voting privileges, and continuation of the loss of fellowship. This must be approved of and done by the elders in communication with the church membership (2 Cor. 2:6).

This is, in essence, the Lord carrying out discipline through the action of the church under the leadership of the elders (1 Cor. 5:4). Similar heavenly authority is seen in the ratification of this disciplinary action as spelled out in Matthew 18:18-19.

The desired result is three-fold:

1. the unrepentant individual repent of their sin.
2. the individual's soul would ultimately saved.
3. the church will not be infected with the same unrepentant sin.

While we hope that we never need to arrive at these final steps, we fully believe that engaging in such is the best way to love a wayward brother or sister. Therefore, we will unapologetically obey the Scriptures as they apply in such instances. While such action may rail against our ideas of love and compassion, we trust that God will ultimately show Himself faithful and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

Matthew 18:15-17	Step 1	Step 2
Progressive, intensive steps of church discipline	<i>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.</i>	<i>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.</i>
Level of Church Discipline	Informal Discipline	Informal Discipline
Who is involved?	Only the persons directly involved.	Persons directly involved plus 1-2 others who can be biblically discerning and objective.
When should this step of church discipline occur?	Step 1 should be occurring every day in gospel-driven communities and relationships.	Step 2 occurs when a person (or persons) refuses to listen and repent after being biblically approached according to the directions of Step 1.
Step Details	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine your own actions & motivations and confess & repent if necessary. • Prayerfully consider how to approach the person. • Deal one-on-one as soon possible after an offense is recognized. • Speak truth in love, give grace for the moment. • Be humble, gentle and patient. • Depending on the nature of the offense, you might try a variety of approaches and repeated attempts before proceeding to the next step. • Avoid gossip and slander. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree on 1-2 discerning and objective people who can understand the situation and help guide involved parties to live out the gospel by faith—perhaps a ministry leader or mutual friend. • May be helpful to meet in a neutral location. • Multiple meetings and a variety of approaches may be necessary to achieve incremental change.

Step 3	Step 4
<i>If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.</i>	<i>And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.</i>
Formal Discipline	Formal Discipline
Those already involved plus church leadership.	The offender's church community must be informed of the general nature of the offense and ways they can minister to those directly involved.
Step 3 occurs when a person (or persons) refuses to listen despite the call to faith and repentance from 2 or more people.	Step 4 occurs when a person (or persons) refuses to listen despite the call to faith and repentance from church leaders and involved community through a variety of approaches and repeated attempts.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Church leadership will investigate by meeting with those involved—listening and asking questions of the involved parties and those they brought into the situation. • Community is crucial at this step— everyone involved needs to be kept updated so that sin can be exposed and the gospel can be ministered in a consistent and loving way. • Multiple meetings and a variety of approaches may be necessary to achieve incremental change. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The unrepentant person is given a final warning, explaining the action taken with this last step of church discipline. • The offender can no longer be affirmed as a believer in Christ. • Excluded from communion. • Excluded from groups such as small group, Bible studies and Recovery. • Expelled from membership. • May be asked to no longer attend weekly services, depending on the elders' discretion. • Members are informed of offense and asked to not associate with the person as if nothing is wrong but to call the unrepentant person to faith and repentance in the gospel. • Elders no longer have responsibility for the unrepentant soul— he is given over to the flesh, world and Satan.⁵ • The desired result is three-fold: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. the unrepentant individual repent of their sin 2. the individual's soul would ultimately saved.⁴ 3. the church will not be infected with the same unrepentant sin.⁴

⁵ 1 Corinthians 5:5-7



PROCEDURES FOR RESTORATION

Forgiveness

In keeping with the goal of restoration, the role of the church must change after there is repentance. This means accepting the person and forgetting the past (2 Cor. 2:7a).

But how do we know when repentance is genuine? What is our responsibility when the sinning party acknowledges their wrong and claims repentance? The following two passages answer this for us.

Luke 3:8, when they "... bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance."

Acts 26:20, "... that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance."

Genuine repentance will make itself evident by its deeds and attitudes. The repentant person will:

1. Freely acknowledge his sin (1 Jn. 1:9; Prov. 28:13a).
2. Cease the activity for which he was disciplined or at least seek help if it's a case of life dominating patterns (Prov. 28:13b; Gal. 6:1f; Jam. 5:19-20).
3. Make restitution and/or ask for forgiveness from those hurt as it is applicable (Phil. 18-19; Matt. 5:23-24).
4. He/she will demonstrate a genuine change of heart, a real concern and godly sorrow over his actions, not in order to be forgiven, but because of the harm caused to the glory of God and the hurt caused others (2 Cor. 7:8-11; Ps. 51:17).
5. He/she will begin to manifest the fruit of the Spirit and a concern for the things of Christ (Gal. 5:22f).

Comfort

This means reaching out to them, assuring them of your support, and encouraging, exhorting, and challenging them to move on (2 Cor. 2:7b).

Love

This means including them, drawing them close, doing for them that which will aid their growth and complete recovery (2 Cor. 2:8). This would include encouraging them to get involved in ministry (Luke 22:31-32). For positions of leadership, there should be a time of testing to demonstrate their qualifications after the analogy of 1 Timothy 3:10.



PERTINENT SCRIPTURES

Church discipline is to be patterned after and based on the divine commands of Scripture (1 Cor. 4:6). We have numerous passages of Scripture which both command and give us God's directives on the how, why, when, and where of church discipline. A failure to exercise this responsibility demonstrates a lack of obedience and belief in the authority of the Bible (1 Cor. 5:1-13; Matt. 18:17-18; Titus 3:10; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; 1 Tim. 5:20; Gal. 6:1).

*Matthew 18:15-17 If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. 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**. 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.*

*1 Corinthians 5:9-13 I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler--not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. **REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES**.*

Galatians 6:1-2 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15 Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

Luke 17:1-4 Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."

James 5:19-20 *My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*

Church discipline is not a group of “pious policemen” out to catch a criminal.

Rather, it is a group of brokenhearted brothers and sisters seeking to restore an erring member of the family.



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