

A Biblical Guide to Church Discipline and Restoration

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It is frequently said, “Life is not fair.” And in a sense, that is true. You don’t have to look very far to see that sometimes bad guys win and good guys lose. We naturally struggle with this apparent moral contradiction. It all comes down to how you understand the word “life”. If you define “life” as the time spent physically alive on planet Earth, then indeed, life is not fair!

Can “life” be accurately defined only by a person’s physical life span? From a biblical perspective there is life after death, so life also includes what happens to people after they die. The Bible teaches that after people die they will be arraigned before God’s judgment seat. God is a perfect judge and a person’s every action, word, and thought while physically alive will be fully and justly judged. Ultimately and finally, life is fair, because God is fair.

God has built one principle into His relationship with every person. This principle can be summarized in one word: accountability. Sometimes God holds people accountable for their actions right now. At other times, God sovereignly chooses to hold people accountable after they die physically and stand before Him. Either way, we are all accountable to God.

The principle of divine accountability lies at the heart of your relationship with God. When you placed your faith Jesus Christ to be your Savior from the penalty of your sin, a marvelous thing happened. Your sins were completely forgiven and you became God’s child. But did God set you free to live your life any way you want to live it? No. The Bible stresses that you belong to God and that you are not your own (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

This same principle of divine accountability lies at the heart of the church discipline and restoration process (Matthew 18:19-20). God has delegated an important aspect of spiritual accountability to the church. Your participation in this process is important for you and those you care about in the Lord. It is a critical part of maintaining the spiritual vitality of a church family and its members. This can be illustrated by comparing it to a nuclear family. I met a young couple who told me that they did not believe in raising their children with rules. Rather than disciplining their children when they misbehaved, they tried to reason with them. The result was catastrophic. Their children were disrespectful and out of control. The children’s bad behavior was the result of their mom and dad’s poor parenting skills. Healthy children and healthy churches are the product of wise accountability, and discipline is accountability in action. Any church that practices church discipline and restoration will be a healthier spiritual family, and through your participation you will grow spiritually.

This study will give you answers to three fundamental questions.

1. What is the biblical church discipline and restoration process?
2. How is this process to be conducted?
3. Why don’t churches practice this process?

This study will examine:

- the biblical purposes of church discipline and restoration.
- the application of this process at Highlands Community Church.
- practical instructions for the individual believer.
- common objections to the church discipline and restoration process.

Ten Purposes of Church Discipline and Restoration

What is church discipline and restoration? In many churches this biblical activity is an unknown practice. Many believers have either never heard of it or have misconceptions as to what it actually is. Church discipline is the process of lovingly confronting a brother or sister who is living in sin. If the loving confrontation produces a change of heart and behavior, then the erring brother or sister has been served and God has been honored. If the loving confrontation is rejected, it results in the sinning brother or sister being placed outside the fellowship of the church. And in so doing, God is honored.

God has designed ten purposes to be accomplished through the church accountability process. Not all of these purposes are accomplished every time spiritual accountability is exercised. The ten purposes of church discipline and restoration are:

- 1) to mature the church.
- 2) to purify the spirit and message of the church.
- 3) to intensify self examination in the church.
- 4) to prove that church leaders love and care.
- 5) to restore a repentant believer.
- 6) to prevent further sin and physical death in the believer.
- 7) to confirm individual responsibility for one another.
- 8) to affirm obedience to God's authority.
- 9) to deny Satan any advantage in the church.
- 10) to cut fellowship ties with unrepentant believers.

First Purpose: To mature the church

One of the primary reasons the church exists is to help believers mature spiritually. The Apostle Paul poured his energy into teaching the Word and discipling believers to accomplish this purpose in their lives. He said, *And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ. And for this purpose also I labor striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.* (Colossians 1:28-29 NASB) One of the main responsibilities of your church leaders is to help you and those in your church become complete in Christ. The word "complete" comes from the Greek word *téleios* which means mature or full grown. To accomplish this goal the Apostle Paul taught the Word of God to everyone God brought to him.

Corrective confrontation was another aspect of Paul's ministry to mature the saints. Paul say he admonished every man. No one escaped his shepherding care. The word "admonishing" comes from the Greek word *nouthetéō* which means to warn, exhort, or to discipline. This is the word used in Ephesians 6:4 to describe a father's corrective discipline of his child's misbehavior. Paul understood that one of the responsibilities given to him by the Lord was to confront and correct unbiblical behavior in the lives of the believers God had placed under his care.

During his missionary journeys Paul raised up and trained leaders in the new churches he planted. Part of their leadership training included a responsibility to bring believers in their churches to spiritual maturity. Paul taught these leaders to teach biblical truth. He also taught them to exercise the church discipline process. An example of this is found in Paul's letters to the church in Corinth. In these two letters Paul communicated several concerns. Among them was his concern for God's holiness. To Paul's astonishment he had received a report that there was unbridled sin in the lives of confessing Christians. Paul wrote these letters out of his concern for the spiritual immaturity and vulnerability of the believers in the Corinthian church.

Paul registered his shock and dismay over the report that came to him *that there is immorality among [the church], and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife.* (1 Corinthians 5:1 NASB) Paul had been informed that someone in this church was sexually involved with his father's wife. This was something that even their non-Christian society did not tolerate. Yet somehow this church had found the ability to overlook this open display of sin.

God's instruction and command through Paul was clear and concise. The Apostle said to *...deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed.* (1 Corinthians 5:5-7 NASB)

Why was Paul so deeply concerned? His concern was for the holiness of God and for the believers' spiritual condition. When sin is tolerated it infects and weakens the spiritual vitality of the corporate body of Christ. On the other hand, when sin is dealt with in a biblical manner then the whole church experiences collective spiritual health!

The Corinthian church had a lot of problems. But one of their strengths was that they were teachable and they responded to Paul's strong confrontation. In his second letter he commended them for hearing his exhortation and following it. The church elders and congregation had decided to put this immoral man out of the church! This action had a profound spiritual effect upon the congregation. Paul spoke of the spiritual renewal within the church. He said, *For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter.* (2 Corinthians 7:11 NASB)

Look at the spiritual impact on that church. There was godly sorrow. The whole church experienced a renewed fear toward God. And they became passionate for the things of God.

Take a moment and ask yourself these questions:

- Would you like to experience a godly sorrow over the things that break God's heart?
- In your worship, would you like to experience a fresh awe and fear of God?
- Is there a longing in your heart to be more passionate toward God?
- Would you like these things for your church family?

I think most believers would answer yes to all of these questions. Church discipline and restoration results in corporate spiritual maturity. One purpose of church discipline and restoration is to guard the spiritual health of your church.

Second Purpose: To purify the spirit and message of the church

People form an opinion of a church before they ever walk in the door. This opinion is based on a number of things including how church leaders and members conduct themselves in public, and the private dealings people have with church members in the neighborhood, on the job, or in business. When visitors or former members leave a church they talk about what they experienced. All of these things contribute to an outsider's opinion of a church. Every church has a reputation in its community, and the reputation of a church is its message.

The spirit and message of a church is important to the Lord because it reflects on Him. That is why one of the requirements of an elder who leads the church is *he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.* (1 Timothy 3:7)

NASB) One of Satan's tactics is to take advantage of a leader's bad reputation because it discredits the church and its Savior.

The Bible gives very practical instruction to Christian men and women to live holy lives. One of the reasons your lifestyle is important is because it affects the spirit and message of your church. The Apostle Paul exhorted *young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home...that the word of God may not be dishonored.* (Titus 2:4-5 NASB) And to the young men, he said, *be sensible, in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, sound in speech which is beyond reproach, in order that the opponent may be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us.* (Titus 2:6-8 NASB) People are the same today as they were during the first century. They watch Christians and they draw conclusions about the Lord from what they see.

The Corinthian church is an example of what happens when sin in the church is not confronted. They had become known as the church that practiced immorality that was not even practiced in the secular society. In contrast to that, when a church grows in holiness it purifies its message to the community and the Holy Spirit uses that good reputation to affect unsaved people.

Most importantly, every church has a reputation before the throne of God. What does God want for His church? Does he want bigger buildings? More people? More discipleship programs? More missionaries sent out? More money in the offering? Of course God is interested and involved in all these things and more. But Jesus said that the greatest thing of all is to *love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.* (Matthew 22:27 NASB) Everything else flows out of this core commitment to love God.

So we are instructed, along with the Corinthian church, to *clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed.* (1 Corinthians 5:7 NASB) God wants believers to be sincere and not hypocritical! He wants churches to model the truth and share it with the community.

Third Purpose: To intensify self-examination in the church

When the church in Corinth read Paul's first letter they were filled with sorrow. Paul's letter forced self-examination. The church leaders and congregation had to decide if they were going to be honest before God. It is apparent that they agreed that they needed to examine themselves individually and as a corporate church body. Each man and woman examined his or her own life before God and His Word, and the leaders of the church examined the congregation as a whole. In their self-examination they may have asked questions like: Where am I falling short of God's standards? Where am I failing to discipline myself to do what I know I should? Where am I failing to stop myself from doing what I know I should not do?

Self-examination is healthy but it is hard for most people. No one likes to admit to personal faults. That is why Jesus exhorted us to examine ourselves first before we attempt to help someone else caught in an area of sin (Matthew 7:5). Jesus said, *Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted.* (Galatians 6:1 NASB, emphasis added)

Paul did not enjoy confrontation. But he knew what it could do in the spiritual life of every member of God's family. When Paul learned of the Corinthian church's self-examination and obedience to the principles of church discipline and restoration he sent his second letter and said to them, *Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it--I see that my letter hurt you, but only*

for a little while-- yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us! (2 Corinthians 7:8-9 NIV) He was not cold and dispassionate about confronting them.

Confrontation had been hard but Paul had known what would happen if he did not confront them. And in the end, he was overjoyed because the results were so positive.

Fourth Purpose: To prove that church leaders love and care

Though church discipline is something that applies to every believer in the church, not every believer is qualified to carry it out. The Scriptures teach that this process is to be carried out by those who are spiritual. The Spirit of God works through men and women of God to restore an erring believer and the spiritual readiness of those seeking to help an erring brother or sister in Christ is a critical factor. That is why the Bible cautions us that *even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted.* (Galatians 6:1 NASB)

In Galatians 6:1 Paul instructs that confrontation is to be done with gentleness. This raises a number of practical requirements for those who confront. Church discipline and restoration requires godly wisdom. The Bible describes what this type of godly wisdom is like in James 3:13 and 17. It is helpful to know that this passage deals with conflict resolution within the church. James identifies eight characteristics of the type of wisdom that brings peace and restoration out of conflict. James says, *Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom....But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.* (James 3:13,17 NASB).

The attitude and behavior of anyone who confronts an erring believer is to be peaceable, gentle, and reasonable. Consider these application questions for each characteristic.

GENTLE	PEACEABLE	REASONABLE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Am I firm yet loving? ● Do people feel I am patient and considerate of them? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Am I trying to help solve the problem? ● Do I listen? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Am I willing to listen to both sides? ● Do I listen to the facts without bias?
OR	OR	OR
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do I push people around and intimidate them? ● Am I unreasonable or harsh? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Am I adding to the conflict? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Are my decisions/counsel based on emotions surrounding the situation, instead of the facts?

A healthy flock is the product of tried, trusted, loving and gentle shepherding from its leaders.

Fifth Purpose: To restore a repentant believer

Another purpose of the church discipline process is restoration of an erring believer. The Bible says that regardless of the sin, this is the church’s responsibility. In Galatians 6:1 Paul says to *restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.* This Greek word “restore” literally means to mend. It is used in the Gospels to describe fishermen mending their nets. The Greeks used it as a medical term to describe a doctor setting

a broken bone. Church discipline has restoration as its goal, to help the erring brother or sister return to full spiritual health and usefulness in the hands of God. This is exactly what Jesus meant when he said *...if he listens to you, you have won your brother.* (Matthew 18:15 NASB).

Paul instructed the Christians in Thessalonica in the same way. In 2 Thessalonians 3, Paul stated this principle twice, first in the negative (verse 14) and then a second time in the positive (verse 15). He said in verse 14, *If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter...do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame.* (NASB) Church discipline is designed to affect the conscience and to bring a sense of shame. But that shame does not come from the spiritual leaders. In fact, those involved in the accountability process are to have an attitude of love, care, and humility, lest they too be tempted. The shame comes from two sources, the first being the erring brother's own conscience. The other is the public nature of the third step in the process, when an unrepentant brother or sister is placed outside the fellowship of the church (Matthew 18:17). The purpose of this is to bring a rebelling Christian to a point of humility and repentance before God.

In verse 15 Paul said, *Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.* "Do not regard" and "warn" are commands in the Greek. Paul made it clear that a sinning Christian should never be mistaken for an enemy. That person is still a brother or sister in the Lord. This underscores two life principles. Number one, Christians sin. In fact, they may be unresponsive to God's inner conviction by the Holy Spirit and His external confrontation by the church. Number two, God's grace. God does not reject a rebellious child and therefore neither should believers. The church's responsibility is to give warning, that the brother or sister might be restored to fellowship with the Lord.

Sixth Purpose: To prevent further sin and physical death in the believer

Church discipline and restoration is first and foremost about the glory of God. In Ephesians 1:11-14 the Scriptures explain that God brings people to salvation to bring glory to Himself. The Apostle Paul understood this principle. That is why he said it was his goal to exalt Christ in his body (Philippians 1:20-21). God is glorified through a believer's choice to live a holy life. Likewise, when His children live in sin they rob God of His glory.

Observing the behavior of some Christians, non-believers have said, "If that is what it means to be a Christian, I don't want to be one!" An erring Christian can become a negative example to unsaved people in the community, so that God and His Word are maligned (Titus 2:5). That is why the Apostle Paul confronted the immorality among the Corinthian believers and he did not wait for them to agree or disagree with him on the matter (1 Corinthians 5:1). Paul declared to the Corinthian church that they were to call a congregational meeting for the express purpose *to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.* (1 Corinthians 5:5b NASB)

What did Paul mean by the phrase "for the destruction of his flesh"? Paul was referring to the person's physical life. The third step in the church discipline process is designed by God to remove the unrepentant brother or sister from under God's protective care. The erring believer becomes open to the attack of Satan. It is sobering to understand that God uses Satan as His own tool of judgment to potentially end an erring Christian's physical life.

This is a serious consequence to sin. The church discipline and restoration process is an act of grace and mercy when weighed against such serious consequences. A biblical example of this is recorded in 1 Timothy 1. Two men had strayed from biblical truth. Their spiritual defection manifested itself in blasphemy toward God. So Paul confronted them. When they refused Paul's loving but firm exhortation, he delivered them to Satan to teach them not to blaspheme (1 Timothy 1:19-20). One

motivation for confronting an erring believer is to prevent his or her potential premature physical death. In this way, involvement in the church discipline process is an act of love, seeking the best for an erring brother or sister.

Seventh Purpose: To confirm individual responsibility for one another

In Galatians 6:1-2 Paul taught, *Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently* (emphasis added). What does it mean to be “spiritual”? This word describes a believer who is walking in the Spirit, filled with the Spirit, and manifesting the fruit of the Spirit in daily life. It is God’s will that every Christian be spiritual. Therefore, the discipline and restoration process is a responsibility of every believer.

An evidence of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in believers’ lives is their sincere love for others (Galatians 5:22f). When someone is stumbling in his or her spiritual life, the church family is to be responsive and committed to be there offering help.

Some people attend a big church so they can remain anonymous. But one purpose of the church is to make disciples. This is one reason that at Highlands Community Church we stress the importance of every adult becoming a member of our church family, signing the membership covenant, and joining a small group. People become very well known when they belong to a small group. They experience God’s love, support, and encouragement through other Christians who become close friends. The loving accountability made possible in this kind of environment is one prescription for preventing a spiritual blow out in a Christian’s life.

Eighth Purpose: To affirm obedience to God’s authority

When other Christians confront a rebellious believer it must be the product of their commitment to God’s standards. God’s Word must be their source of authority. They do not have the liberty to do whatever they want, when they want, and how they want! The discipline and restoration process is designed to cause believers to see that they need to submit themselves to God’s authority in their lives.

Ninth Purpose: To deny Satan any advantage in the church

Satan is constantly planting land mines in believers’ paths. One of his objectives is to wreck, ruin, and destroy believers’ lives and families. Satan is allowed to destroy God’s people when a church either passively neglects or actively refuses to practice the church discipline and restoration process. In Revelation 2:18-29 our Lord Jesus confronted the church in Thyatira because members tolerated other people’s sin among them. The result was that Satan had freedom to deepen his hold on these people. This is critical to understand! When a church refuses to deal with sin, it becomes vulnerable to the spiritual attack of Satan. The result is deluding philosophies that bring confusion and increased sin. It even results in sickness and physical death (1 Corinthians 11:30).

The Bible teaches the sobering reality of spiritual warfare between Satan and Christians. In Ephesians 6:10-20 Christians are informed about Satan’s tactics to attack and destroy them. However, God’s resources are more than sufficient to protect Christians. Every individual Christian can stand victoriously against Satan’s attacks by putting on the full armor given to him by God. The armor consists of six things: biblical truth, personal holiness, preparation to share the Gospel, faith, salvation, and the Word of God (Ephesians 6:14-17). In addition to individual preparation God has also given every Christian added protection through corporate prayer. What is even more astounding is that Satan cannot resist the spiritual advances of the church. Jesus declared that *upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it.* (Matthew 16:18 NASB)

Satan has no advantage over the body of Christ unless the church gives it to him! Satan reigns through deception and lies. So when the church applies God's truth, the power of Satan is always broken and he is denied any advantage within the church.

Tenth Purpose: To break fellowship ties with unrepentant believers

When erring believers do not change their minds regarding their sin they are to be placed outside the fellowship and treated like unbelievers. The Bible is very specific on how believers within the church are to act toward a believer who is under discipline. The Scriptures teach Christians to respond in three ways toward an unrepentant believer.

The first response from the church is to view the erring believer as someone in need of spiritual change. Jesus instructed the church to view an unrepentant believer as *a Gentile or a tax-gatherer* (Matthew 18:17 NASB). In Christ's day a Gentile was a person who was outside the promises and blessings of God. God had established a covenant relationship with Israel. To experience God's blessings, a Gentile was required to become a Jew. Jesus' point was to stress the need for spiritual repentance and change.

Second, the church is not to associate with the erring believer. Paul was very specific when he said, *If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter...Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed.* (2 Thessalonians 3:14 NASB) What does it mean to "not associate" with a disobedient Christian? The Greek word "associate" literally means to mix together. Paul said it even more pointedly to the Corinthian church. They were to *not even to eat with such a person.* (1 Corinthians 5:11) This clearly means the following things:

- The erring brother is not welcome to participate in the ministries and activities of the fellowship.
- Privately, he/she is not welcome to participate in the personal fellowship of believers.
- If he/she attends an event at church, he/she is to be admonished as a brother.

Last, the church is to view the erring believer as a brother and use every opportunity to warn him. Paul said, *Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.* (2 Thessalonians 3:15 NIV) The word "warn" is a command. This is not a suggestion, a recommendation, or something to do if it seems right. The practice of the church discipline process is an evidence of obedience to this command.

The Process of Church Discipline and Restoration

The process of church discipline and restoration is outlined by our Lord in Matthew 18:15-20. The process involves the following five steps.

Step One—You deal with sin by privately reproving the erring believer when you have firsthand knowledge of sin in the body of Christ (Matthew 18:15; Luke 17:3). If the erring believer listens and responds then you have served your brother or sister. If he or she does not listen and repent¹ then explain the five steps of church discipline. Tell him/her that you are moving to the second step in the process.

Step Two—You hold a private conference with the erring believer. You take with you one or two people to serve as witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15; Matthew 18:16). If the erring believer listens and responds then you have served your brother or sister. If he or she does not listen and repent then review the five steps of church discipline. Tell him/her that you are moving to the third step in the process.

¹ The biblical concept of repentance means "a change of mind which results in a change of behavior".

Step Three—You reprove the erring believer before the church (Matthew 18:17; 1 Timothy 5:20). At HCC that means that you and your witnesses present the erring believer before the elders, who act as representatives of the congregation. If the erring believer listens and responds then you have served your brother or sister. If he or she does not listen and repent then the elders will move to step four and explain to him/her what will be involved in that step.

Step Four—The erring believer is placed outside the fellowship of the congregation by the Elder Board (Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 5:5; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15; 1 Timothy 1:20). The church still seeks opportunities to exhort the erring believer to change his or her mind toward the sin. If the erring believer listens and responds then you have served your brother or sister and you move to step five. If he or she does not listen and respond then you continue with this exhortation as the Lord allows.

Step Five—If after being placed outside the church fellowship the erring believer repents, then he or she meets with the elders. His or her repentance will be confirmed before the elders with you and your witnesses present. The elders then publicly restore the believer to fellowship with the Lord and the church.

Practical Instructions for Church Discipline and Restoration

The practical application of these five steps might be very intimidating. The purpose of this section is to give you biblical counsel and pastoral advice for each of these steps.

Practical Instruction for Step One—

This step is initiated when you have firsthand knowledge of a brother or sister living in sin. A common mistake is made here. I have had people come to me and tell me what they know about a sinning believer. There's only one thing I can do with a second hand report. I stop them from telling me any details. If I keep listening then I am allowing them to gossip. Instead I direct them to go to the sinning Christian and confront him or her with what they know to be true.

What should you do if someone comes to you and tells you something second hand? You are to stop him or her from telling you details, even if it's done under the pretense of praying for the situation. If you don't put a stop to it you are allowing gossip to spread which is destructive. Instead, you exhort the concerned believer to go and share any concerns firsthand with the erring brother or sister, following the five steps above.

I had someone come to me with knowledge about sin in another Christian's life. And he was honest about his feelings. He felt intimidated and fearful about approaching this person. So what should he have done? What should you do if that happens to you? Let me give you some biblical and pastoral advice. First, pray to the Lord about the erring believer. Ask God to work in his/her heart and prepare you both for your meeting. Only God's Spirit can convict a person of sin, righteousness and judgment. Ask the Lord to use your actions and words to glorify Him and help your friend.

Pray and ask God for wisdom about what to say, how to say it, and when and where to say it. It is important to refer to specific behavior and directly contrast it to biblical commands and state plainly that this behavior is sin. If it is helpful, write out what you want to say to your erring Christian friend. Seeking the Lord in advance and knowing what He would have you say will give you humility and confidence. Lastly, reflect on the importance of each of the ten purposes of spiritual accountability described above. Confess your own sin to God. Commit yourself to glorifying God and helping the person you care about. And remember that the step you are taking is in obedience to the Lord.

If your brother or sister repents as a result of your admonishment, then praise the Lord together. If he or she does not repent then explain the steps of church discipline. Let him or her know that you are going to take the second step and come back with at least one other person as a witness.

It is important to understand that sin must be dealt with quickly. Therefore it is helpful to minimize the amount of time between each of the steps in this process. However, the Holy Spirit is the One who convicts hearts. Some time needs to be allowed to observe whether the step just taken has been successful before moving to the next step.

Practical Instruction for Step Two—

If your Christian brother or sister has refused to listen to you the next step is to return to your erring friend with one or two witnesses. The people you choose to take with you are important. They need to be spiritual people. It is helpful if they are people whom your erring friend knows, because God works through relationships. It is important that you do not go into detail with the additional people who serve as witnesses. Their role is not to be accusers. Their role is to come, observe, and confirm the sin being confronted.

You may want to consider including one of the elders in this step. If the erring brother is involved in the ministry then it can be wise to contact one of the elders overseeing that ministry area. This elder will help provide biblical counsel, encouragement, and assurance the full process is followed.

Contact your erring Christian brother or sister and explain that you want to meet again. Be sure to tell him or her who is coming with you. And explain that you are doing this out of love and obedience to the Lord's teaching (Matthew 18:15-17). Before you meet, be sure that you and any who accompany you spend time in prayer. Consider the words of our Lord in Matthew 18:18-20 (NASB) *Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst.* Ask the Spirit of God to do His divine work of grace in the life of your erring friend. Ask God to use this process to bring Himself glory and to help restore your friend. Confess your own sin. Yield your lives to the Spirit's control.

If it is helpful, write out what you want to say to your friend. Repeat to the offending person what was said the first time you met. Ask if he/she has had a change of mind toward the sin. If your erring Christian friend repents then praise the Lord together. But, if your erring Christian friend does not repent in response to your contact, then ask the witnesses to state before you and your erring brother or sister what they have seen and heard. Then explain that you will be communicating this to the elders of your church with the testimony of the witnesses.

Practical Instruction for Step Three—

You are at this step because your Christian brother or sister has hardened his or her heart to the Lord's appeal through your second meeting. It is now your responsibility to bring this to the church. This is done at Highlands Community Church by contacting one of the elders. You and your witnesses will be asked to meet with the elders to explain the situation. The elders will invite you and the erring Christian to meet with the elders for the purpose of confronting his sin to bring him to repentance. If the brother or sister responds to the Lord's admonition through the leaders of the church then the Lord has been honored and the believer has been helped. If the erring believer does not repent in response to the Lord's admonition then the elders will explain that they will take the next step of communicating to the congregation the specifics of this situation.

Practical Instruction for Step Four—

This is the step in which the elders of the church communicate to the congregation the name of the unrepentant believer and the nature of his or her sin. The purpose is to officially remove the erring Christian from involvement with other believers and ministries of the church. The Elder Board of Highlands Community Church follows these three practices:

- The Senior Pastor or Chairman of the Elder Board drafts the public statement for the Elder Board's approval. The Elder Board approves the action and the statement.²
- The Elder Board statement is read at the end of the weekend worship services.
- Prior to the reading of the statement each worship service is closed to allow visitors and guests to leave and to invite members and regular attendees to remain for the communication from the Elder Board concerning the body life of Highlands.

Common Questions and Answers

When a brother or sister is placed outside the fellowship of the church there are serious spiritual implications for him or her. It also has implications for each member and regular attendee of our church. But what are those implications and what do they mean to you? The following are common questions that people have asked and answers.

Q: Can the unrepentant brother attend church programs?

A: The purpose of this biblical process is to remove him from the church gatherings. But what do you do if he has a child in an upcoming program? What if the erring brother decides to come a church program uninvited? The answer to these and other related questions raises an important caution to the congregation. We must be careful on the one hand not to be legalistic nor on the other to be permissive. If he does come, you and others in the body are not to act like nothing has happened. Greet the person in a spirit of Christian love and concern. And ask him if he has changed his mind regarding his sin. That simple greeting and inquiry assures you, him, and others within the church family that the sin and discipline are not being avoided or swept under the carpet.

Q: Can the unrepentant brother be included in my personal social gatherings?

A: When you are gathering for the purpose of Christian fellowship or ministry then the erring believer should not be included. The reason is to follow the biblical teaching to reinforce the consequence of his sin. However, do not neglect the biblical instruction to use opportunities to contact the erring brother or sister to exhort him or her to repent and return to the Lord. For example, if you are a member of the same Little League team or civic club, then use that contact as appropriate to let him know you care about him, inquire if he has changed his heart toward his sin, and you are praying for him.

Q: What do I do or say to him if I see him in the community?

A: The worse thing you can do is to avoid the person, say mean things, or turn and walk the opposite way. To do that is unloving and wrong. Instead, be prepared for a public encounter. Anticipate what you would want to say. For example, greet him in love. Inquire about his welfare. But do not leave the conversation without asking, "Have you had a change of mind and heart about your sin?" And then let him know you are praying for him.

Q: If the erring brother says he repents of his sin, is that enough to stop the process?

A: The person needs to demonstrate the fruit of repentance. At this point discuss specific, outwardly verifiable actions the person will take to demonstrate a change of heart. This should be directly in line with the offense. For example, he or she would be directed to ask forgiveness of the ones who were

² Decisions reached by the Highlands Community Church Elder Board is based upon unanimous agreement.

offended. Other behaviors such as regular attendance at church and accountability sessions are very appropriate.

Q: Are pastors exempt from this process?

A: This is an excellent question and the Bible addresses this subject. In 1 Timothy 5, Paul asserts that sinning elders are to be confronted. The word “elder” is used interchangeably with the words “pastor” and “bishop” (1 Timothy 3:1; 1 Peter 5:1-2). Paul teaches that church leadership should *not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses* (1 Timothy 5:19 NASB). It appears from this passage that the first step of the discipline process (Matthew 18:15-16) was assumed by Paul to have already occurred. Consider this example. Let’s say you observe sin in an elder’s life so you take the first step and go to him privately. If that does not result in repentance then you are to move to step two. According to Matthew 18:16, in step two you are to take one or two witnesses with you. However, in the case of an elder it is different. Paul instructs you to take *two or three witnesses* with you. If the elder maintains a stubborn heart toward the sin issue in his life then you and your witnesses are to take step three and go to the Elder Board. If the elder still refuses to acknowledge his sin and turn from his wrong behavior then he is to be publicly rebuked before the congregation. One of the reasons for making a public statement to the congregation is *that the rest also may be fearful of sinning* (1 Timothy 5:20b NASB).

Church Discipline

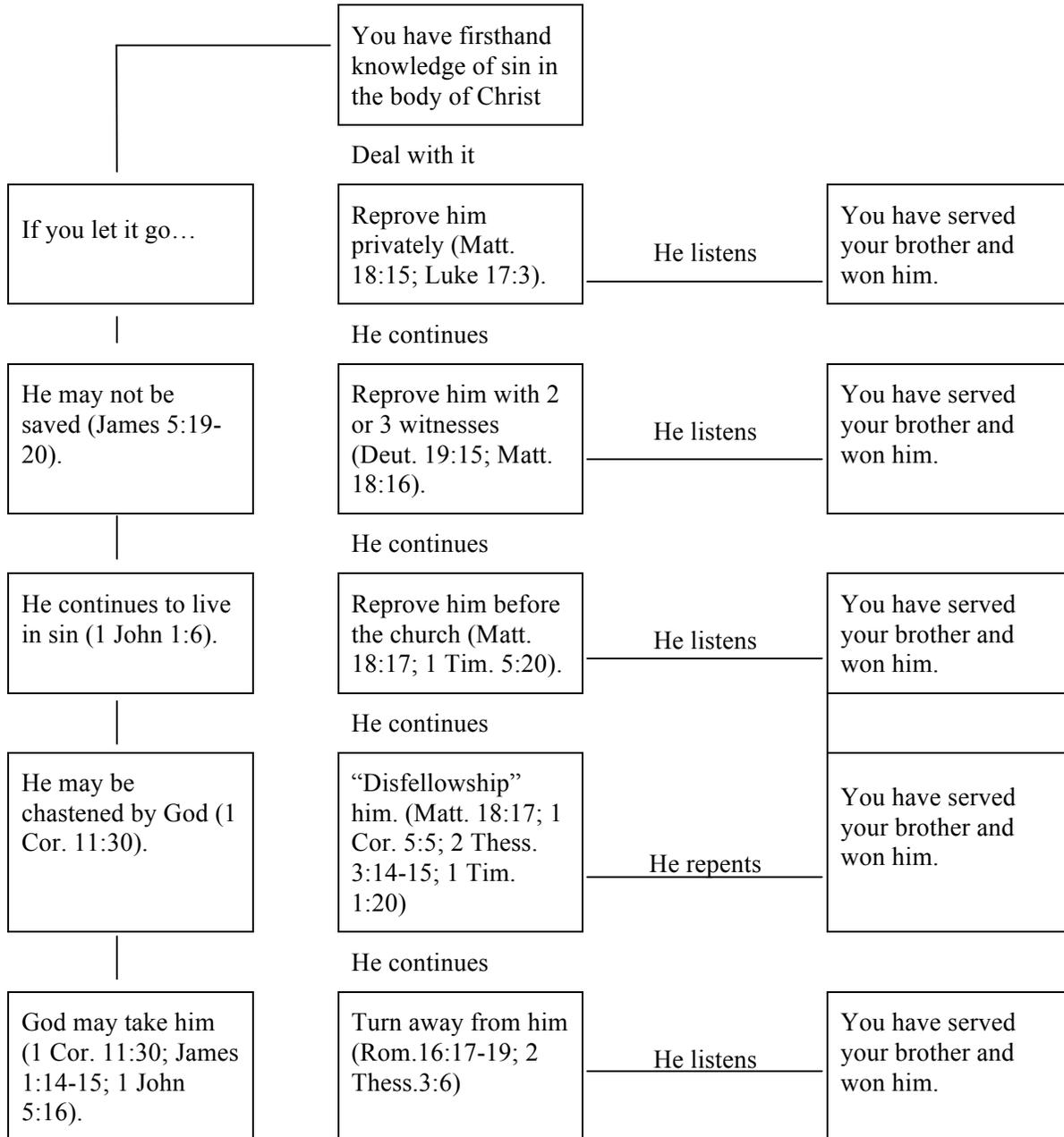
“Many people fail to make a clear distinction between punishment and discipline, and there is a very significant difference between these two concepts. *Punishment* is designed to execute *retribution* for a wrong done. *Discipline*, on the other hand, is to encourage the *restoration* of one involved in wrongdoing. Punishment is designed primarily to avenge a wrong and assert justice. Discipline is designed primarily as a corrective for the one who has failed to live according to the standards of the church and/or society.”*

Passage	Problem	Procedure	Purpose
Matthew 18:15-18	The sin of a “brother” (undefined)	1. Private reproof 2. Private conference 3. Public announcement 4. Public exclusion	Restoration (to win “your brother over”)
1 Corinthians 5	Immorality Greed Idolatry Drunkenness Swindling	1. Corporate grief 2. Removal from midst 3. No association	Restoration (5:5) Purification (5:7)
2 Corinthians 2:5-11	Unnamed	After sincere repentance 1. Forgive him 2. Comfort him 3. Love him	Restoration (2:7) Protection (2:11)
Galatians 6:1	“A sin”	Restore him 1. As spiritual persons 2. With meekness 3. With reflection	Restoration (2:11)
2 Thessalonians 3:6-15	Laziness, gossip (busy-bodies”)	1. Take note of him 2. Keep aloof from him 3. Admonish him (as a brother, not an enemy)	Restoration (“He may feel ashamed.”)
1 Timothy 5:19-20	An accusation against an elder entertained without witnesses	1. Need 2-3 witnesses 2. If sin continues, then rebuke before all	Purification (so “others may take warning”)
Titus 3:9-11	Divisiveness	1. Give 2 warnings 2. Reject him (as warped, sinful, self-condemned)	Protection (against division)

*Carl Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1985), p. 79.

Church Discipline Flowchart

1. Open sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 5:1-13)
2. Unresolved personal conflicts (Matthew 18:15-20)
3. Divisiveness (Romans 16:17-18; Titus 3:10)
4. False teaching (Galatians 1:8-9; 1 Timothy 1:20, 6:3-5; 2 John 9-11; Revelation 2:14-16)



*Carl Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1985).

Three Objections to Church Discipline.

Many churches do not practice the church discipline and restoration process taught by the Lord in Matthew 18:15-20. The reasons for this apparent neglect vary from church to church. However, there are three objections that are often given for not practicing this process. The following is a biblical examination of each of these objections.

The First Objection: You're being judgmental!

The first objection asserts that the church discipline process is judgmental. The proponents of this objection look to Christ's statement, "Do not judge or you too will be judged!" To accurately understand our Lord's statement it is important to study its fuller context. This statement was made by Jesus Christ in Matthew 7 which reads: *Do not judge or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?* (Matthew 7:1-4 NIV)

In this context Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees who were the spiritual leaders of the masses. They prided themselves on a copious study of the Old Testament Scriptures. However, by the time of Christ, they had elevated their own interpretations and traditions above the Scriptures. As a result they were misunderstanding and misapplying the Scriptures. In this context Jesus opposed the hypocritical, unloving, legalistic discipline practiced by the Pharisees. It is equally important to observe that Christ was not asserting that people should not be held accountable. In fact, Jesus taught accountability, but by those who are godly! That is why Jesus continued with this command to the Pharisees in verse 5 (NIV): *You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye!* Jesus was asserting accountability. But, as Paul emphasized in Galatians 6:1, restoration is to be done by those who are spiritual.

This raises two questions. The first is who should hold another person accountable for his or her sin? The answer is those who are not living in sin and are allowing the Spirit of God to control them as evidenced by the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:17-22). That is exactly what Jesus meant when he said *first take the plank out of your own eye.*

The second question is why is accountability to be done only by those who are spiritual? The answer to this question is more obvious. Hypocritical people may overlook aspects of sin because of their own guilt or insensitivity to the Word of God. Unspiritual people may have the wrong attitudes and/or take the wrong actions. What that means is that they generally will be too harsh on the sinning person. As a result they will offend and hurt the person by their attitude or unloving actions. In their attempt to help they actually hurt their erring brother or sister.

An objection to the church discipline and restoration process as judgmental is not necessarily correct. The problem occurs when the people leading the process are not spiritual. Jesus Himself endorsed the process of spiritual accountability. The critical factor is that it must be practiced by spiritual men and women.

The Second Objection: Only God has authority to judge me!

There is a second common objection that is given to the application of Matthew 18:15-17. This second objection appeals to the sovereignty of God in 1 Corinthians 4:4 (NIV), which states: *It is the Lord who judges me!* An accurate interpretation of this statement, once again, requires a study of the context.

In this context the Apostle Paul addressed the judgmental accusations being made against him by some within the church in Corinth. In this paragraph Paul asserts: *I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore, judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.* (1 Corinthians 4:3-5 NIV)

The Apostle Paul stated that he was not to be judged by any individual believer in Corinth, nor any human court. He did not even judge himself. Only God was his judge. He then exhorted these believers to follow this same pattern. However, it is critical to observe that this passage does not address church discipline. In this scenario, “judging” has nothing to do with judging sin in another Christian’s life. These words are a statement of conclusion of what was said in 1 Corinthians 3, where Paul addressed the fact that this church had a significant problem with division (3:3). They had developed party spirits around different spiritual church leaders. For example, some people in this church had become proponents of Paul. They elevated Paul’s teaching above other teachers. Then there were others in the church who had become proponents of Peter. They elevated Peter’s teaching above Paul’s and that of other teachers. There were still others in the church who had become proponents of Apollos. And the group that attempted to present themselves with the greatest spiritual authority and piety became proponents of Christ (3:4).

Paul concluded chapter three with the powerful and glorious declaration that there were to be no divisions around these leaders. Why is that? The answer is important. It is because these leaders have been given to all of them, as Paul asserted in verses 22b and 23, *all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.* Paul asserted in 4:1, *So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and those entrusted with the secret things of God.* The pronoun “us” is plural. It refers to all of the teachers that Paul mentioned in chapter three, including Paul, Peter, Apollos, and yes, even Christ.

This church had splintered into factions with the object of division being their assertion of the superiority of different church leaders. The Peter faction judged the inferiority of Apollos and Paul. And so Paul responded that “no one, not even himself” was to judge one servant of God as superior or inferior to another! Paul said, *Do not go beyond what is written. Then you will not take pride in one man over against another.* (1 Corinthians 4:6 NIV)

It is important to observe that later Paul did address the subject of confronting a sinning brother. In chapter five he instructed the church to discipline sin. There was open immorality in the church and they were doing nothing about it! Paul confronted the sin and instructed the church to do the same thing when he said, *Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?* (1 Corinthians 5:2 NIV) Paul specifically proclaimed his judgment of the sinning brother (v. 5:3,5). And he told the Corinthians to judge this sinning brother too (5:7,9,11-12).

This demonstrates the importance of practicing the discipline and restoration process. God has delegated an aspect of His authority to every local church. And each local church is responsible to hold a sinning brother or sister accountable.

The Third Objection: People aren't helped, only hurt by this!

The third objection to practicing church discipline and restoration as taught in Matthew 18:15-17 is based on the belief that discipline will drive the person away from the Lord and the church. Sincere and well meaning church leaders have said, “In all my years in the church I have never seen anyone helped by this!” What this is saying is that because discipline is not always effective then it is wrong. But if discipline was intrinsically bad, then God would not discipline any of us! Instead God says, *all*

discipline at 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. (Hebrews 12:11 NASB) One important factor for church discipline to be effective is that a person must be teachable. In over twenty years of pastoral ministry I have personally confronted countless people over their sin and the vast majority of them responded with teachable hearts. As a result they were helped and God was honored.

Make no mistake about it, exercising discipline can be difficult. That's because discipline hurts. If a person likes to discipline other people, that may be an indicator that there are issues in his or her life. In my own family, I do not discipline my children because its fun to do. I do it because it is what they need and discipline, if applied, is profitable. Through your obedience to this process God works His righteousness in the lives of His children. The fact that discipline is difficult may be why God reminds us a second time in Hebrews 12 that God *disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness.* (Hebrews 12:11 NASB)

Confronting another believer can be difficult. Your friend may experience grief. However, your actions are not bad. Confrontation is not evil nor is it vicious. In fact, just the opposite is true. It is good, and healthy, and right. That is why God gives full and specific instructions regarding the purposes of church discipline and restoration.