



sojourn
COMMUNITY CHURCH

Church Discipline Guidelines

ELDER POSITION DOCUMENT

(revision 2)

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Introduction: The Gospel Life

We are created in the image of God and we are created to reflect our God through our lives. However, because of sin's entry into God's created order, all of God's creation is marred by sin—"things are not what they are supposed to be." By nature we are all sinful, resulting in continual rebellion against God. But because of God's rich mercy and great love, God redeems his people through the finished work of Christ on the cross and brings us, as sinful human beings, back into a right relationship with God. The sad reality for us as Christians is that (1) we still struggle to believe in who God is, even though he has revealed himself to us in Scripture, (2) we still struggle to believe in what God has done for us in and through the gospel, and (3) we still struggle to believe that God's promises and power apply to us.

This struggle to live out the gospel takes place on a journey towards home. This journey has a destination and includes transformation. We are all weary and wayward sojourners who need help every step of the way to better understand, believe, and walk in a way pleasing to the Lord—a way that brings glory to him by building up his body in love (Eph. 4:16) and advancing his kingdom in a dark and dying world (cf. Matt. 28:18-20). Every member of Christ's body needs one another to remember that this life is a journey towards home to be with our heavenly Father. Every member of Christ's body needs one another in order to conform more and more to Christ as we all are being prepared for the final and ultimate marriage to Christ by the sanctifying work of the Spirit.

Such inter-dependent body life is a picture of the gospel in action. We reflect our redeeming God as we help one another to hold fast to Christ (1) in the midst of our suffering and sin, (2) in our battle to believe, and (3) in our struggles to live so that our whole life is worship (cf. Rom. 12:1). Such whole-hearted living declares and demonstrates the gospel to believers and unbelievers and brings glory to God! This is the mission and purpose for our lives in Christ.

Understanding Church Discipline

In a broad sense, church discipline is a term used to describe the means of helping one another to conform to Christ as described by Paul:

(Col. 1:28-29) 28We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. 29To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.

Two Aspects of Church Discipline

From this passage, we see two necessary components for presenting "everyone perfect in Christ:" (1) teaching, which is **formative** in nature—preaching, teaching, prayer, Bible study, community, etc. and (2) admonishing, which is **restorative** in nature—rebuke, exhortation, correction, etc. Both formative and restorative discipline is centered on the word of God for training in righteousness so that we might be thoroughly equipped to live out and minister the gospel in everyday life. God saved us by grace so we might engage in his kingdom work by helping others to believe, understand, and live out the gospel.

(2 Tim. 3:16-17) All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

(Eph. 2:10) For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

The progressive steps of Matthew 18:15-20 are implied whenever the term "church discipline" is used. Members of the family of God are called to actively journey with one another in community to grow in grace by faith in Christ as we all struggle in a fallen world.

An Individual Calling

It is important to remember 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. Gal. 5:22-23; 2 Tim. 1:7). By the grace of God, we can grow in our ability to live by faith through the Spirit's sanctifying work (1 Pet. 1:2) as we relate to God and others through the realities of life.

A Corporate Calling

However, 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 (Eph. 4:15, 29) as we are often blind to our own sinfulness (cf. Matt. 7:3-5). We need one another to believe and live out the gospel—this is God's design. Every member is called to exercise their individual gifts to build up the body in love (1 Cor. 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. Col. 1:28-29).

Spiritual Warfare

We must remember and believe that 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 powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12). Our "enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8) and seeks to keep us living in fear and not by faith. Therefore, we need to love one another through encouragement, rebuke, correction, and nurture as we are all prone to wander from our God.

A Reflection of God's Love

Church discipline must be understood within the gospel reality that God lovingly disciplines his children so that they may grow in grace for the sake of righteousness and peace found in Christ. The church discipline we carry out in our church is a reflection of and a means for how God disciplines his children as an expression of his love.

*(Heb. 12:4-11) 4In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, 6because **the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.**" 7Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? 8If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. 9Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! 10Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. 11No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.*

The Purposes of Church Discipline

Through God's grace, church discipline is a means ...

1. To help conform us individually and corporately to Christ, in terms of the purity and unity of his church, for the glory of God (Col. 1:28; Eph. 4:1-6; 1 Cor. 10:31)
2. To help bring a wandering soul back to Christ (Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:5; Gal. 6:1-5). Restoration and redemption are always the goal for any disciplinary efforts.
3. To help deter others from sin (1 Tim. 5:20).
4. To help protect the church from false teachers, wolves, and division (Acts 20:25-31; Titus 1:10-11).

God's Provisions in Church Discipline

1. God Provides His Word and Spirit

I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matt. 18:18)

"To bind" conveys the notion "to prohibit." "To loose" conveys the notion "to permit." In essence, the Lord tells us, "I give you authority to exercise discipline permitting and prohibiting those things that I have either authorized or forbidden in my Word. You exercise my authority and heaven itself backs you up."¹ God's will and purpose are accomplished through church discipline.

2. God Answers Our Prayers

Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. (Matt:18:19)

God declares that he hears and answers our prayers as we earnestly seek him for spiritual wisdom and understanding and for the faith to follow his guidance. God takes pleasure in shepherding us as his people and leading us in his righteous paths as we seek his will to be accomplished in and through the discipline process.

3. God Promises His Presence

For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them. (Matt. 18:20)

When God's people meet in a humble and submissive way before the Father to deal with church discipline issues, God promises to be with us. Such a promise provides much needed encouragement since discipline issues require courage, confidence, and perseverance in Christ. God is with us as we work through the discipline process and as we prayerfully pursue his wisdom and grace to deal with such matters in a way that gives him glory.

Church Covenant, By-Laws, and Church Discipline

Members sign an agreement form which signifies their "agreement with the church by-laws, doctrinal statement, and covenant, and agreement to live, teach, and provide counsel in accordance with and not contrary to these documents." They understand and agree to Sojourn's by-laws when they join our body. These documents require the church to take progressive steps of discipline whenever a person rebels against God exhibited through word and action. Elders intervene in the formal stages of church discipline for the sake of the unrepentant person and the body as a whole.

Part of the Sojourn Membership Covenant reads:

8. I covenant to follow the biblical procedures of church discipline and submit myself to informal discipline as I strive to live out the gospel in community and formal discipline if the need should ever arise (Matthew 18:15-17; Galatians 6:1-5). If I withdraw from membership while the subject of pending disciplinary action according to Matthew 18:15-17, I expressly consent and submit to the elders' continuing authority to complete the disciplinary process set forth in our church by-laws."

9. I covenant to submit to the authority of the Scriptures as the final arbiter on all issues (Psalm 119; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). God enabling me, I will strive to consider my commitment to this Membership Covenant on a yearly basis. I understand that it is an evaluative tool, as well as an affirmation of my continuing conviction and purpose. My responsibility will be to notify the Sojourn leadership if at any time I can no longer commit to this covenant, or if I have any questions, comments, or concerns regarding Sojourn.

Church membership and church discipline are outlined in Articles X and XI in of the Sojourn by-laws.

¹ Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline*, p. 114.

Elders and Church Discipline

The elders have been appointed by God to shepherd his people by teaching them, leading them, and caring for them. God holds the elders of his church accountable for these responsibilities:

(Acts 20:28-31) **Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock** of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. **Be shepherds** of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. 29I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. 30Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. 31So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

(Heb. 13:17) Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. **They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.** Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

(Jas. 3:1) Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that **we who teach will be judged more strictly.**

Shepherds Protect, Provide, and Pursue

God always journeys with his people regardless of where they are in life and regardless of the situation (cf. Ps. 23:4,6). Jesus, as our Shepherd (Jn. 10:1-14), calls us as elders to be his "under-shepherds," to pursue those who are straying from the way of God, the truth of God, and the life of God (cf. Matt. 18:12-14; Jn. 14:6).

(Ps. 23:1,4,6) 1The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want... 4Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me... 6 Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

(Matt. 18:12-14) 12"What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? 13And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. 14In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

"True elders do not command the consciences of their brethren, but appeal to their brethren to faithfully follow God's Word. Out of love, true elders suffer and bear the brunt of difficult people and problems so that the lambs are not bruised. They bear the misunderstanding and sins of others so the assembly may live in peace. They lose sleep so that others may rest. They make great personal sacrifices of time and energy for the welfare of others. They see themselves as men under authority. They depend on God for wisdom and help, not on their own power and cleverness. They face the false teacher's fierce attacks. They guard the community's liberty and freedom in Christ so that the saints are encouraged to develop their gifts, to mature, and to serve one another." (Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, p. 98)

God strongly rebukes those shepherds who do not care for the flock.

(Ezek. 34-2-6) 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the **shepherds of Israel** who only take care of themselves! **Should not shepherds take care of the flock?** 3 You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. 4 You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. **You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost.** You have ruled them harshly and brutally. 5 So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals.

The Church Discipline Process

The process in Matthew 18:15-20 serves as an overall outline for carrying out church discipline. For the sake of context, the passage on church discipline is embedded within other relevant passages: (Matt. 18:7-11)—the seriousness of causing others to stumble; (Matt. 18:12-14)—the importance of pursuing the one lost sheep; (Matt. 18:21-35)—the parable of the unmerciful servant.

Who Initiates the Process?

There is often confusion over who is responsible for the initiation of restorative efforts. God does not give us a choice. Whoever is aware of an offense with another is responsible to pursue peace. Why is this so? Our worship of God is hindered by our sins and the sins of others. The following two verses support this principle of mutual responsibility for reconciliation within the context of worship:

Regardless of whether you sinned against another ...

(Matt. 5:23-24) Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

Or another has sinned against you ...

(Mark 11:25) And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.

God calls us to forgive. Matthew 18:21-35 deals with the gospel principle of forgiveness.

Preparation Step—By Faith, Pray for Wisdom, Strength, and Love

Restorative discipline requires much prayer and wisdom to avoid spiritual abuse and unnecessary hurt through unloving and overbearing confrontation. As you prepare to restore, check your motivation and attitude. The love of Christ must be the compelling reason (2 Cor. 5:14-15), remembering the other is a brother or sister in Christ and you are pursuing peace as far as it depends on you (Rom. 12:18; 14:19). You should approach a brother or sister in Christ with a spirit of humility and gentleness.

By Faith, Pray for Wisdom and Strength

Everything should be done by faith (cf. Heb. 11:6) including every aspect of church discipline. Faith is displayed through prayerful dependence upon the Lord to provide the wisdom and strength we need to love with endurance and patience, flowing from a heart of joy and thanksgiving for our God who redeemed us by His love.

Remember, gospel confrontation is about God's agenda, not our own agenda. Notice one of the key emphases of Matthew 18:15-17 is whether the unrepentant person listens. If the other is to listen, what will you have to say?

Do Not Merely Share From Your Experience: You are not called to speak from your own experience, but to speak the truths of the gospel into the specific and personal situation that calls for faith and repentance. You can share from your own experience only as a concrete illustration of how these specific gospel truths relate to the realities in your own life.

Pray for Wisdom: Ask God for wisdom to know how His Word speaks to this situation. Remember the goal of every gospel confrontation is to help the other person see the holiness and beauty of God, the sinfulness of self and others, and to see the significance and sufficiency of the cross of Christ.

*(Eph. 1:17) I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the **Spirit of wisdom and revelation**, so that you may know him better.*

(Col. 1:9) *9For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped **praying for you** and asking God to fill you with the **knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding**.*

Pray for Strength, Courage & Endurance: We also have to believe God can do above and beyond all we could ever ask or think in every aspect of life. Church discipline requires strength, courage and endurance. Church discipline is totally dependent on the power of God working through the Spirit of God and the people of God as they minister the word of God.

(Eph. 3:14-21) *14For this reason I kneel before the Father, 15from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. 16I pray that out of his glorious riches he may **strengthen you with power** through his Spirit in your inner being, 17so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18may have **power**, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is **the love of Christ**, 19and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. 20Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, **according to his power that is at work within us**, 21to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.*

(Col. 1:10-14) *10And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, 11being **strengthened with all power** according to his glorious might so that you may have **great endurance and patience**, and joyfully 12giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. 13For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

By Faith, Pray for Love to Gently Restore

God cares how we relate to one another and designed relationships to be the context and means for gospel transformation. His word provides overarching principles, as well as specific instruction, for how we are to live out the gospel in community. Knowing that sin produces disunity and unrest in relationships, God addresses how we are to relate to one another even in situations involving discipline:

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

(Eph. 4:15; 29) *15Instead, **speaking the truth in love**, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ... 29Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification [building up] according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.*

(2 Tim. 2:22-26) *22Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. 23Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. 24And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, **he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful**. 25Those who oppose him he must **gently instruct**, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, 26and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.*

(2 Tim. 4:2-5) *2Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; **correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction**. 3For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. 4They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. 5**But you, keep your head in all situations**, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.*

Progressive Church Discipline Steps:

All church discipline should maximize redemptive and protective efforts for all involved in accordance with the Scriptures. The details associated with each step are presented in the table, “The Steps and Dynamics of Church Discipline” in **Appendix 1**.

The Issue of Confidentiality

The church discipline process outlined in Matthew 18:15-17 infers a progressive and escalating level of disclosure and action. Step 1 requires the matter to be discussed privately between the parties directly involved (Matt. 18:15). Step 2 expands the level of disclosure to a minimum of 1-2 witnesses (Matt. 18:16). Step 3 expands the level of disclosure to a church leader and possibly more people in direct community with those involved for the sake of additional prayer and counseling support (Matt. 18:17a). In Step 4, when all previous steps have failed, the elders are called to tell the church members at a members meeting. Informing the entire church is necessary so that the members can pray for the unrepentant person and engage the person through intentional redemptive dialogue instead of hanging out as if nothing were wrong.

The Issues of Timeliness and Leadership

All church discipline issues should be addressed promptly and intentionally at every step of the process. Moreover, all redemptive and restorative efforts require leadership, whether informal or formal. Unnecessary delays in the disciplinary process perpetuate sin, create confusion and tension within the community, and create a perception of a lack of concern or decisive action from the church leaders in dealing with rebellious and sinful living.

Step 1: Privately Seek Reconciliation (Matt. 18:15)

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.”

Believe it or not, the everyday gospel life is the context for church discipline. The gospel emphasizes unity, peace, truth in love, forgiveness, and reconciliation for three primary reasons: (1) such realities are rooted in the gospel and reflect God and his nature, (2) such realities describe the call of every believer to live in a way that results in the purity and unity of the body of Christ, and (3) such realities serve as a testimony to the world in the greatness and glory of God. We no longer live for ourselves but for him who died for us, redeemed us, and reconciled us to himself.

The phrase, “if he listens to you, you have won your brother over” in Matthew 15:16 explains the purpose of church discipline—redemption. The concept of the word “won” implies reclaiming a person of value who was once lost. As the parable of the lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son teach in Luke 15 the church should pursue an unrepentant member relentlessly until the person repents and is restored.

The Scriptures command us to first deal with another in private. Such gospel confrontations—rebukes, warnings, and encouragements—should be taking place in our everyday relationships and in our various gatherings and reflect ongoing informal church discipline. Such intentional redemptive relationships reflect a pervasive gospel ministry of the word that serves as the primary means for building the church up in love.

*(Ps. 141:5a) Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him **rebuke** me—it is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it.*

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

*(Col. 3:16) Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you **teach** and **admonish** one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.*

*(1 Thess. 5:14) And we urge you, brothers, **warn** those who are idle, **encourage** the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.*

(2 Thess. 3:14-15) *14If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. 15Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but **warn** him as a brother.*

For elders who commit sin in a public manner (1 Tim. 5:19-20) *19Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. 20Those who sin are to be **rebuked** publicly, so that the others may take **warning**.*

(Titus 3:10-11) *10**Warn** a divisive person once, and then **warn** him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. 11You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.*

(Heb. 3:12-15) *12See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. 13But **encourage** one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. 14We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. 15As has just been said: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion."*

(Heb. 10:24-25) *24And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 25Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us **encourage** one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

General Steps for a Gospel Confrontation^{2,3}

Our goal is to do more than read people a list of charges from Scripture or tell them what we think of them. We want to help people understand what is wrong and lead them back to Christ for their only source of hope. Here are some key steps in the restoration process:

- **Consideration** — What does God want the person to see (about self, God, others, life, truth, change)? Ask questions; engage them in discussion. What does God want me to see?
- **Confession** — What does God want the person to admit and confess? What things do I need to confess?
- **Commitment** — To what new ways of living is God calling this person made possible by the gospel? What new ways of living is God calling me to live by faith through the gospel?
- **Change** — How should these new commitments be applied to daily living by the grace of God for me and the other person?
- **Choose** — What words should be used so that the confrontation will be gentle and loving to minimize defensiveness and not cause undue hurt.
- **Carve** — How much time will be sufficient for an unrushed, face-to-face conversation, making sure you talk soon after arranging the meeting? Long delays cause undue tension and anxiety. Avoid communicating via phone or e-mail—eye contact and non-verbal communication are essential to gospel confrontation. Make sure you allow enough time so both of you can share and ask necessary clarifying and exploratory questions.

Be Careful to Avoid Gossip and Slander

If someone has sinned against you or you are a witness of someone's unrepentant sin, go to the person directly without sharing the offense with others. When confronted with sin, it is far easier to talk to others for advice about the offense rather than seek the Lord and his word for wisdom and step out in faith to confront the person out of love. As you share openly with others about the offense, you can easily commit the sin of gossip or slander—negatively influencing the reputation of the other person. If you fail to talk to the person directly in private, you run the risk of misinterpretation at best and slander at worst, adding an extra "layer" of sin to the situation.

(Lev. 19:16) " *Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am the LORD.*"

(Eph. 4:31) *Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice*

(Jas. 4:11-12) *11Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in*

²First four bullets adapted from Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hand*, p. 231.

³Last two bullets adapted from Mark Lauterbach, *Transforming Community*, pp. 108-109.

judgment on it. 12There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

If you are truly unsure how to handle a situation then you can seek counsel from one who has biblical wisdom, but do so with care and practice confidentiality. Do not share the name of the person(s) involved and do not share details that will reveal the identity of the offender.

If someone comes to you and asks for counsel about a situation, encourage the inquirer, if directly involved, to deal with the offender in private. If the inquirer is not directly involved, then encourage the inquirer to have the person involved to deal with the offender in private.

Step 2: Involve Select Others (Matt. 18:16)

But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'

If the person refuses to listen as a result of the private, one-to-one confrontation, despite multiple attempts and a variety of approaches, then you should take the next step in the church discipline process (cf. Matt. 18:16).

- a. You both can invite someone else into the process by mutual agreement.
- b. In the case of a stalemate, you have the freedom to invite others into the process, even if the offender objects. Before you invite select others, inform the other person whom you plan to invite into the process.
- c. If the disciplinary issue occurs within community group, you should invite the associated community group leaders into the process. If the group leaders are unsure how to handle the situation, they are directed to seek the counsel of their coach. Such counsel can be sought either (1) in an anonymous manner or (2) in an explicit manner with prior permission from those involved. Either the community group leader or coach will provide leadership in this step of the process.
- d. The primary role of reconcilers is to help those involved to confirm: (1) whether a sin was actually committed (v. 16b), (2) whether truth was spoken in love, (3) whether the person listened and repented, and (4) all involved did what was necessary in accordance with the gospel to pursue peace and reconcile.

Step 3: Tell the Church (Matt. 18:17a)

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church

What does it mean to tell the church? Step 3 is derived from the first half of (v. 17).

If the unrepentant person refuses to listen after completing steps 1 and 2 of the church discipline process outlined in Matt. 18:15-17a, then those who have carried out the progressive steps of informal church discipline (steps 1 and 2) should now inform the elders (step 3).

Informing the Elders

At this first phase of formal discipline, Sojourn understands the command “tell it to the church” to mean to inform the elders who are the God-appointed leaders of the church.⁴ Though all members of the church bear the responsibility for mutual encouragement and rebuke in the gospel, the elders bear the responsibility “to bind and loose” based on the authority of God and his word (cf. Matt. 18:18-20). The elders lead the church in the formal disciplinary process (steps 3 and 4) as they work with those already involved. The elders can conduct an additional investigation to ensure all the facts are known.

⁴ See David Edling’s article, “The Biblical Basis for Leader-Led Discipline,” which argues the elders have been given the authority to exercise church discipline in the church based on the exegesis of Matt. 16:17-19 and Matt. 18:18-20. Edling writes, “Tell it to the church,’ therefore as defined by verses Matt. 18:18-20, means ‘tell it to those in the church who bear the authority of the keys of the kingdom.’”

Discipline Done Best in Community

The following list serves as a general guideline for the elder who provides leadership for this stage of the discipline process:

- a. The elder should work with the community of believers who have been directly involved in the informal steps of church discipline and any others who might be needed to journey with the offender for intentional encouragement and counseling in the gospel.
- b. The elder, or designated ministry leader, should establish an accurate chronology of events with sufficient dates and details of: (1) history of the offender's actions and response after the offense was revealed, (2) efforts made by individuals and community group in steps 1 and 2 of the progressive discipline process, (3) all significant interactions during step 3, to include notes of each formal meeting and confidential e-mails. Pastoral updates should be submitted per the guidelines in **Appendix 3**.
- c. To best love the unrepentant person, inform him/her that everything that is shared with any members of the ministry group can and will be shared with everyone in the ministry group—this approach minimizes deceit from the offender, maximizes communication, and avoids triangulation and group members being manipulated by the offender.
- d. The elder and involved ministry leader(s) are to approach the unrepentant person directly, exhorting the person to repent and turn back to Christ by faith, using a variety of approaches and repeated attempts. If possible, the elder or designated ministry leader will establish weekly counseling meetings to work through the involved issues and other group members should set up regular one-on-one or one-on-two meetings with the offender throughout the week.
- e. If the unrepentant person has a family, be sure family members are being cared for during each step of the journey, since they can be easily forgotten in the midst of the chaos and an inordinate amount of energy is expended on the offender. If a spouse is struggling with ongoing sin, it is crucial to meet with both the husband and wife given their one flesh relationship and because their relational dynamics will serve as a primary means for redemption and restoration.
- f. The elder, or designated ministry leader, should submit regular updates to the elders. The elder should also seek the counsel of other elders as necessary to ensure the best care is being offered in accordance with the Scriptures.
- g. In this step, the elder, or designated ministry leader, should inform the community group of the progressive church discipline and encourage those in the group to pursue and confront the unrepentant person in love with the goal of repentance and restoration. The church leader should take the time to teach the group about the purposes and steps of the disciplinary process and take the necessary time to answer any and all questions concerning relevant biblical teachings.

Refusing to Meet or Refusing to Listen

If the unrepentant person refuses to meet with an elder and others involved, then increased efforts are made to warn the person face-to-face at the home, workplace, or somewhere in the community. If all attempts to meet the person fail, then the church will send a certified letter to the person's home or workplace. The letter should outline steps associated with two options: (1) the option to repent and be restored and (2) the option that results should the person refuse to listen to the church. **Appendix 4** provides guidelines for a warning letter drafted for a Sojourn member and an example letter. **Appendices 5 & 6** provide guidelines for a two-step warning for a regular attendee.

If the person refuses to listen even to the church elders after a variety of approaches and multiple attempts, then the offender needs to be taken to the last step of church discipline—(step 4) treating the unrepentant person as if he or she is an unbeliever. The letter of Paul to Titus provides a general guideline for the number of warnings before proceeding to step 4 of church discipline:

(Titus 3:10-11) 10Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. 11You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

As the passage infers, if the person refuses to listen, then church members are called to disassociate with the person. For a fuller explanation, see section, "Action Steps for the Church" under Step 4 of the church discipline process.

Step 4: Treat The Unrepentant as an Unbeliever (Matt. 18:17b)

and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

If a person refuses to listen and repent through steps 1 to 3 of the church discipline process, then the Scriptures command the last step of the disciplinary process—treating the unrepentant person as an unbeliever (pagan or a tax collector). What does this mean exactly? The term "pagan" was used to refer to Gentiles, those outside God's covenant fellowship while the term "tax collector" was used to refer to a Jew who was an outcast, a traitor to his own people.⁵ Bottom line—a person who once professed faith in Christ, but currently refuses to repent, should be treated as an outsider and not as a brother or sister in Christ.

Why Inform the Church at this Step?

At step 4, the second phase of formal discipline process, the whole church is to be informed of the unrepentant person. It is important to remember that church discipline is a matter restricted to the family of God and therefore should not be dealt with during a Sunday gathered service where there is a mix of believers and unbelievers. Instead, the church will be told through a regularly or specially scheduled members meeting. This step of informing the body of Christ is inferred from the following passage:

(2 Cor. 2:5-6) 5If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent—not to put it too severely. 6The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him.

Informing the church as a whole is important for three main reasons: (1) it conveys to the unrepentant person the weightiness of his/her sin and its influence on the body of Christ (2) it gives each person in the church the opportunity to encourage and call the wayward brother or sister to repentance and faith in Christ as they encounter the person in the various realms of life, and (3) it protects the witness of the church, avoiding confusion with those outside the body of Christ, and with those inside the church by providing a warning that such willful rebellion is not tolerated by God and is detrimental to the health of the body (1 Tim. 5:20).

If the offender is present, the unrepentant person will be rebuked publicly and encouraged to confess and repent. If the person is not present, the church will still be informed.

Discernment in Disclosing Names

Once a church discipline case reaches step 4, when the unrepentant person refuses to listen even to the church, the elders are to inform the church of the general situation and how it violates Scripture, the action steps taken against the offender, and the action steps required by the members. The elders can exercise discernment in whether or not to share specific names based on the following factors: (1) the public nature of the offense, (2) the informal or formal influence of the person within the church and community, and (3) the potential danger for church members not to know the identity of the offender.

For Those Considered a Believer

Depending on the nature of the sin struggle, as in the case of idleness or neglect of family responsibilities, the Scriptures still command decisive church discipline but directs the church not to regard the person as an enemy but as a brother or sister in Christ. However, the Scriptures are clear that we are called not to associate with the unrepentant person:

⁵ Grace Community Church booklet on church discipline.

(2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15) *6In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.... 14If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. 15Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.*

(Titus 1:16 provides additional description of one who claims to know God) *They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.*

Such separation serves as a God-ordained means to help those hardened by sin to confess and repent. Every encounter with such offenders should be used to exhort and encourage them to turn away from their wicked ways and turn back to Christ, trusting in him for the grace to live out the gospel by faith.

For Those Considered an Unbeliever

The Scriptures give specific instruction for dealing with one who calls oneself a believer but has turned away from following Christ and refuses to listen to the church through a progressive discipline process.

The Scriptures calls us to disassociate from an unrepentant person who refuses to listen to those within the body of Christ. Such disassociation may sound counter-intuitive given one's need to hear and experience the gospel in community. However, those who have turned from following Christ had the opportunity to hear, but chose to disregard God's teaching and ignore the warnings and exhortations of his people. God will not be mocked. His glory and church is at stake. However, because of God's strong and redemptive love, he "disciplines those he loves and punishes everyone he accepts as son ... God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness ... it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:6, 10-11).

The passages below are strikingly forceful and extreme in how we are commanded to treat one who has been removed from membership due to a refusal to submit to God and repent. The language used implies strong and decisive action after all the facts are understood. We must trust in the sovereign wisdom of God as revealed through Scripture, trusting his wisdom and ways in dealing with those hardened and blinded by sin so that they might be brought to repentance. We must also remember the gospel's call to love our enemies and to serve as ministers of reconciliation.

(Matt. 18:17) *If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.*

(1 Cor. 5:4-7; 11-12) *4When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, **5hand this man over to Satan,** so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. 6Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? 7Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed... 11But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. 12What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? 13God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."*

(2 Cor. 6:14-17) *14Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? 15What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? 16What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." 17"Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you."*

(Eph. 5:11) *Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.*

(1 Tim. 1:19-20) *holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. 20Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have **handed over to Satan** to be taught not to blaspheme.*

(Titus 3:10-11)⁶ *10Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, **have nothing to do with him**. 11You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.*

Action Steps Against the Unrepentant Person

Sojourn elders exercise the authority of God's Word in dealing with one who remains unrepentant through the four steps of church discipline. The elders can exercise discernment in determining the level of exclusion associated with removing the unrepentant person from membership. The following action steps are generally applied to those who are removed from church membership:

- a. The one removed from membership can no longer be affirmed as a believer in Christ and is excommunicated from church membership (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:11-13; 2 Cor. 6:14-17; Eph. 5:11; Titus 3:10-11), which also implies the person will not be allowed to take part in any benefits of membership, such as members meetings and family celebrations.
- b. The one removed from membership should not be allowed to take communion (1 Cor. 11:27-32). The elders need to be informed if the person is seen taking communion after being removed from membership but before restoration. The elder or designated ministry leader will not make a scene during the worship service but will contact the person after the fact.
- c. The one removed from membership cannot attend any Sojourn community groups—unless authorized by the elders and for the purpose of public confession (2 Thess. 3:14; 1 Cor. 5:9-13; 2 Cor. 6:14-17; Titus 3:10). Such willful unrepentance confuses believers and unbelievers and can possibly divide the group. Be sure to remove the person from any church group e-mails.
- d. The one removed from membership may not be allowed to attend Sojourn Sunday Gathered. Such exclusion depends on the nature of the offense, the potential for divisive influence within the community, the potential danger posed by the offender, or unless authorized by the elders for the purpose of public confession (2 Thess. 3:14; 1 Cor. 5:9-13; 2 Cor. 6:14-17; Titus 3:10).
- e. The one removed from membership is no longer under the care of the elders and the person is prayerfully handed over to his flesh, the world, and Satan (1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:25-26) so the Lord might grant repentance.
- f. All steps taken by the church against the one removed from membership are designed to be restorative in nature so that the offender might be brought to repentance and his/her soul saved in the end (1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Tim. 2:25-26).

Action Steps for the Church

Practically, what does it look like to not associate with one who has been removed from membership and is to be treated as an outsider of the church?

What is permissible?

- The elders will ask Sojourn members to pray for the person removed from membership and to ask the Lord to bring the person to repentance and back to Christ.
- The elders will inform Sojourn members that they are permitted to associate with the unrepentant person only for the purpose of admonishment and restoration (2 Thess. 3:15;

⁶ This passage addresses the divisiveness from those who argue the law and lesser topics, but the principle holds true also for those being disciplined, given a little leaven impacts the whole body (cf. 1 Cor. 5:6),

Gal. 6:1-2). They will also be instructed to call the offender back to Christ by faith and repentance with gospel intentionality, humility, and grace that both comforts and challenges with the goal of redemption.

What is not permissible?

- Members of the church should not associate with or eat with (2 Thess. 3:14; 1 Cor. 5:9-13; 2 Cor. 6:14-17; Titus 3:10) the unrepentant person for the following reasons:
 - Such disassociation from Christian community is designed by God to help the person realize the seriousness of his/her sin and need for repentance (gospel shame—2 Thess. 3:14).
- The elders will inform Sojourn members that they are not permitted to associate with the person removed from membership and to pretend everything is okay or normal in the midst of the person's rebellious and unrepentant posture towards God and the church.
 - The unrepentant person needs to understand that the church is unified in God's discipline process, as led by the church elders.
- Additional wisdom and discernment is needed for those church members who have relational ties (family, co-worker, neighbor) with the one removed from membership. In extreme cases involving physical or emotional abuse, or illegal activities, family members should maintain separation with the unrepentant offender (cf. 1 Cor. 7:10-11). Moreover, co-workers and neighbors should not gather socially with the unrepentant person for a meal.
- The following scenarios are examples of how to handle an invitation or encounter with the unrepentant person for social purposes (for the sake of illustration, Bill has been removed from membership as a result of church discipline):
 - Bill calls Pete to see if he wants to hang out. Pete replies, "I appreciate the invitation but there is a problem—you are under church discipline and you have not repented for what you have done. I would like to get together, though, to talk about your situation in light of the gospel."
 - Bill sees Pete at a local hang out spot. Bill asks Pete if he can join him. Pete, responds, "Bill, I would enjoy time with you but I can't because of you being under church discipline. You can join me if we can talk about your refusal to listen to God and the church ..."
 - Pete is shopping and runs into Bill. Pete stops and asks, "Bill, how are things?" Bill replies, "Not so good. I don't understand why the church has to single me out ... what a bunch of hypocrites!" Pete responds, "Bill, I am sorry you feel that way but you are not seeing things rightly. I agree with the elders' decision regarding you because I see how they are acting in accordance to the Scriptures. They love you and I love you. We pray the Lord would grant you repentance so we can be family once again ... until then, we can't pretend nothing is wrong."

Additional Reflections on Not Associating with the Unrepentant Person

- Treating someone as an unbeliever is painful but necessary. Such measures are both redemptive and protective. God views such formal discipline as (1) a loving act (cf. Heb. 12:1-13; Prov. 3:11-12), (2) a means for restoring a wandering person, and (3) a means of protecting the church and individual members from being divided and devoured through sinful influence.
- Such redemptive and protective measures are designed by God to providentially use the offender's flesh-driven lifestyle, the world, and Satan to bring the person to repentance and back to Christ.

- o Enjoying a meal together suggests a unified fellowship, which is not the case under such rebellious circumstances. The command to not eat with one under church discipline also includes prohibition from Communion, the symbolic meal that reminds us of Christ's sacrifice which is reserved for only believers who strive to live out the gospel by faith:

(1 Cor. 11:27-32) 27Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. 28A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. 29For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. 31But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. 32When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.

- o If the one excommunicated does not repent over the course of time, it could be the person was never saved and therefore never a true member of the body of Christ:

(1 John 2:19) They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.

If A Member Leaves While Under Discipline

It is not uncommon for a person undergoing church discipline to withdraw from the church. Church discipline steps will still be taken should the offender leave the church in an attempt to avoid church discipline. The Sojourn by-laws, Article XI—Church Discipline, state:

"If a member withdraws from membership while the subject of a pending disciplinary action according to Matthew 18:15-17, such withdrawal shall not cancel the Elders' authority to complete the appropriate disciplinary action."

In the event the unrepentant person begins attending another church, the Sojourn by-laws, Article XI—Church Discipline, state:

"If a member withdraws from membership while the subject of a pending disciplinary action according to Matthew 18:15-17 and begins attending another church, the Elders are obliged to inform the new church of the offender's status."

Covenant Membership and Lawsuits

Every member of Sojourn signs a Membership Agreement Form that states,

"By signing this form, I indicate my agreement with the church by-laws, doctrinal statement, and covenant, and agree to live, teach, and provide counsel in accordance with and not contrary to these documents. My responsibility will be to notify the Sojourn elders if at anytime I can no longer commit to these documents, or if I have any questions, comments, or concerns regarding Sojourn."

Sojourn members cannot take any legal action against Sojourn per the church by-laws, Article XI—Church Discipline:

"The methods described here also cover any and all disputes or claims arising from or related to church membership covenant, doctrine, policy, practice, counseling, and discipline, including claims based on civil statute or for personal injury.

By joining this church, all members agree that these methods shall provide the sole remedy for any dispute arising against the church and its agents, and they waive their right to file any legal action against the church in a civil court or agency."

Members Meeting for Church Discipline: Steps and Options (Matt. 18:17b):

- Utilize a regularly scheduled **members meeting** or schedule a special members meeting to inform the church of discipline cases that reached step 4 and require removal from membership.
- **Teach** on the purpose and process of church discipline. Such teaching will serve as a reminder for some and as additional teaching on body life of the church for others.
- **Identify** the situation or person, depending on the nature and publicity of the offense, so that the members may act in appropriate response according to scripture. Do not share all of the details but describe the nature of the sin struggle and how the offense violates Scriptures—say as little as necessary but enough to enable the church to do the work of ministry.
- **Inform** the members of the implications of being removed from membership, stating the action steps taken against the unrepentant person.
- **Instruct** the members of their responsibilities—how they can love the unrepentant person by praying for the person and situation, avoiding fellowship in a redemptive manner, and ministering Christ and his word. Members should also be encouraged to love on the person’s family, as they have been significantly impacted and are in great need for love through intentional care, support, and relevant practical assistance.
- **Warn** the members against gossip, stressing the church discipline process is a “family matter” and should not be discussed with anyone outside of Sojourn membership. Also call every member to examine their own relationship with God in gospel humility, to include their own struggles to live out the gospel.
- **Share** that if the Lord grants genuine repentance (cf. Rom. 2:4; 2 Tim. 2:24-26) and such repentance is evident by word and action over a period of time, then the individual can be restored to fellowship, with much discernment and caution, through the normal means to membership.
- **Pray** the Lord might grant repentance and restoration to himself and to the church. Ask the members to break up in groups of 3-5 to go before the Lord and cry out for mercy for those who have been removed from membership, for their family members, and for themselves.

Repentance and Restoration

The Lord grants repentance (cf. 2 Tim. 2:25-26). The power of the gospel is declared and demonstrated every time a sinner repents.

God provides direct and specific instructions on how we are to restore one who, by God’s grace, has experienced godly sorrow that “brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret” (2 Cor. 7:10).

(2 Cor. 2:5-11) 5If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent—not to put it too severely. 6The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. 7Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. 9The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. 10If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, 11in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

The passage makes clear those in the church are called to forgive, comfort, and reaffirm their love for the one who was disciplined by the church and later repents by the grace of God. Such redemptive and restorative actions reflect the gospel and how Christ forgives, comforts, and loves us.

Intentional gospel community is essential to restore one hardened by sin but broken by grace. When sincere repentance is evidenced through changed affections and submission towards God, along with changed actions and attitudes towards others (cf. 2 Cor. 7:10-11; Jas. 4:7-10; Joel 2:12-13), follow the general list of steps to help restore the repentant person with God and others:

1. Require the one being restored to go before those in his/her immediate community for confession of sin and to request forgiveness—the church leader will help determine who is included in this relevant community.
2. Gather and coordinate individuals, and/or couples to offer redemptive community focused primarily on the person’s relationship with God and secondarily on how the gospel calls the person to relate to others—friends, spouse, children, extended family, and others as appropriate.

3. Outline the restoration process with as much detail as necessary. Restoration may take weeks or months depending on the severity and duration of the struggle.
4. Provide clear guidance to the one being restored and the one(s) impacted by the sinful behavior all throughout the process of restoration, making sure the redemptive community knows of major details and steps along the way.
5. Ensure the church leadership and redemptive community is somehow included in the restoration process should the one being restored choose to work with an outside counselor. One means of linking care received from outside the church with those in the church is for the one(s) involved in outside counseling to give written consent for a church leader to be periodically updated by the counselor.
6. Communicate clearly to those involved when the restoration process is complete, as determined by the church leader overseeing the process. Recognize a transition needs to take place in the minds of everyone, especially the one being restored once the formal discipline process is complete—help identify “next steps” for this transition period.
7. Require the one being restored to attend the membership classes again, go through a membership interview with an elder, and sign the Membership Agreement Form, which acknowledges the person understands and submits to the biblical guidelines of the Church Covenant and by-laws.
8. Arrange to announce the person’s restoration to fellowship in a community group or member’s meeting, based on the extent of the church discipline, so that all can rejoice and celebrate God’s mercy (Luke 15:3-7—parable of the lost sheep; 15:11-32—parable of the lost son).
 - o The person should be given the opportunity for a brief public confession.
 - o The announcement should make clear the person is once again in right standing with the Lord and his church. The church should be exhorted to forgive the person, to reconcile with the person, not allowing anything that may hinder the person’s fellowship with the church—anything less may hinder the person’s continued growth in grace and may allow the enemy the opportunity to wreak havoc with the person and church body once again (2 Cor. 2:10-11).

Resources:

Christ Fellowship Church—“Restoring Those Who Fall” (Jim Elliff and Daryl Wingerd)
Grace Community Church—Church Discipline Pamphlet
Mars Hill Church—Church Discipline Manual
Jay Adams—*Handbook of Church Discipline*
Mark Dever—*The Deliberate Church*
David Edling—“The Biblical Basis for Leader-Led Discipline”
Mark Lutherbach, *Transforming Community*
Alfred Poirier—*The Peacemaking Pastor*
Mark Prater, Covenant Fellowship Church—Sermon, What God Expects of Us, Matthew 18:15-20
Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hand*
The Peacemaker Church—Implementation Manual

Appendix 1: The Steps & Dynamics of Church Discipline

Matt. 18:15-17	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Progressive, intensive steps of church discipline	<i>¹⁵"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."</i>	<i>¹⁶But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'</i>	<i>¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church</i>	<i>and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.</i>
Informal or Formal Discipline	Informal Church Discipline	Informal Church Discipline	Formal Church Discipline	Formal Church Discipline
Who is involved? (small to large)	Only the persons directly involved	Persons directly involved plus 1-2 others who can be biblically discerning and objective	In addition to those already involved, the willing party must tell a church elder	The church family must be informed at a members meeting of the general nature of the offense and ways they can minister to those directly involved
When should this step of church discipline occur? (more to less frequently)	Step 1 should be occurring everyday in gospel-driven communities and relationships	Step 2 occurs when a person (or persons) refuses to listen after a variety of approaches and repeated attempts	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
Step Details	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prayerfully consider how to approach the person Deal one-on-one as soon after an offense is recognized. Speak truth in love, give grace for the moment Be humble, gentle, and patient Try a variety of approaches and repeated attempts 	<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 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The elder 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 Regularly scheduled counseling and triad meetings will be necessary 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 CG Expelled from membership Members are informed of offense at a Members Meeting 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—given over to the flesh, world, and Satan

Appendix 2: Reducing Exposure to Legal Liability

1. Ensure church covenant, constitution, and disciplinary guidelines address key issues:
 - A member waives the right to withdraw membership unilaterally (otherwise accused can avoid discipline by slipping out back door).
 - Church discipline will be carried out even after an unrepentant person withdraws from involvement with the church.
 - Ensure regular attendees are made aware of “implied consent to discipline” through publicly disseminated literature, through the membership class material, resource area, and website.
 - If the elders are aware of the offender going to another church, they are obliged to inform the new church of the offender’s status (by-laws—Article XI.B.3)
 - The elders have delegated authority to oversee the discipline process, to include investigating the situation once the discipline reaches the formal stage, making the final decision on whether to remove the unrepentant person from membership, and informing the church of the name of the offender, the general nature of the offense, and the action steps to be taken by all members.

2. Ensure the following practices are implemented and followed:
 - Obtain informed consent to church discipline policies through membership classes, membership interviews, and Church Covenant.
 - Teach regularly on church discipline

3. Ensure church discipline is carried out in a redemptive, biblically faithful manner:
 - Follow church discipline guidelines consistently.
 - Always act in a loving, patient, and redemptive manner.
 - Never show favoritism.
 - Always speak the truth.
 - Communicate only with people who have a legitimate right to know.
 - Substantiate any unproven allegation before taking public action.
 - Base decisions on clearly articulated biblical grounds.
 - Always keep restoration as the ultimate goal.
 - In the case of telling the church:
 - Announce to members only in a special meeting since this deals with family business. Church discipline is not to be done during a Sunday Gathered service since believers and unbelievers, members and non-members would be present.
 - Videotape the scripted presentation to protect against possible defamation charges.

Appendix 3: Guidelines for Pastoral Updates

Pastoral updates are needed once the disciplinary process escalates to Step 3 when the elders are informed and an elder or designated ministry leader provides overall leadership.

General Guidelines for the *Initial Write Up*:

1. Write as general as possible but as detailed as necessary so the elders will have sufficient information to understand the nature and nuances of the situation.
2. Do not include any names. Use the relevant roles (husband, wife, son, daughter, friend, aunt, co-worker, etc.) as a means for identifying those involved.
3. Identify the elder or ministry leader who is providing overall leadership. Also include a general description of who else is involved in the ministry team and what redemptive efforts have been made.
4. Include relevant dates including the date in which the offense was revealed and when struggles began. The pastoral updates should serve as a subset or summary of more detailed records kept by those directly involved.
5. Include comments regarding any legal or governmental involvement.
6. Include any significant quotes from the unrepentant person, even from e-mails or text messages.
7. Provide a "next-step" recommendation at the end of the update.
8. The pastoral update should be between 100-300 words (1-2 detailed paragraphs) based on the required details to be reported. Generally, the more complex or difficult the case, the longer the update.

General Guidelines for *Follow-up Write Ups*:

1. Add the follow-up report at the end of the initial report so the elders can review previous updates as necessary.
2. Include the date of the follow-up report and any significant events or dynamics since the last report.
3. Provide a "next-step" recommendation at the end of the update.

General Guidelines for Submitting and Handling Pastoral Updates:

1. E-mail a pastoral update monthly, on Monday the week of the all-elder monthly meeting, to the Pastor coordinating the church discipline cases. Also provide an update whenever there is a significant turn of events, either good or bad.
2. Take the following pre-cautions when e-mailing pastoral updates:
 - a. Type "Confidential Pastoral Update" in the subject line
 - b. Type the following at the very top of the e-mail in red, capitalized letters:
DO NOT FORWARD. DO NOT DISCUSS WITH WIFE OR ANYONE ELSE—DISCUSS WITHIN ELDER GROUP ONLY AS NEEDED
3. Do not forward or print out any church-discipline-related e-mails. The elder coordinating the church discipline cases will send out an electronic copy of the assimilated updates the day before the elder meeting. Hard copies provided at the meeting will be collected and shredded after the meeting.

Appendix 4: Warning Letter—for a Member (components)

Date

Name

Address

City, State Zip Code

Dear Joe,

Opening

History of Scriptural Violations (this section will contain the most customized details)

History of Redemptive Attempts & Subsequent Responses (this section will contain the most customized details)

Broad Explanation of Two Biblical Options

Option 1—Repentance and Restoration

Briefly Explain Repentance Process

Briefly Explain Restoration Process

Option 2—Refusal to Repent—

Warning of Removal from Membership & Implications

Actions Steps Taken Against the Offender

Actions Steps Taken by the Church

Process of Restoration Upon Repentance

Deadline Date and Contact Person

Closing

Grace and Peace in Christ,

The Elders of Sojourn

Appendix 4: Warning Letter—for a Member (example letter)

Date

Name

Address

Louisville, KY Zip Code

Dear [Name],

We greet you as fellow members of the body of Christ. As your pastors, we come to you with heavy hearts, guided by the Word and Spirit of God. Your refusal to meet face-to-face requires us to write this letter which serves as a final warning in the progressive church discipline process found in Matthew 18:15-20.

[History of Scriptural Violations]

Through a course of events culminating in March 2009, it was revealed you were guilty of [biblical sin(s)] (Scriptural reference) and refused to take radical steps to avoid further temptations (Matt. 5:29-30). During this time, you have not cared for your wife and children (1 Tim. 5:8; Eph. 5:22ff; 6:4; Dt. 6:5-9). You withdrew from Sojourn community by not coming to Sunday Gathered (Heb. 10:24-25) and by not submitting to members and church leadership as the disciplinary process escalated (Matt. 18:15-17; Heb. 13:17). We as elders are accountable by God to care for you as a member of his body (Acts 20:28-31).

[History of Redemptive Attempts & Subsequent Responses]

You refused to listen to [Friend A] and [Friend B] as they confronted you in love (Matt. 18:16) and refused to listen to [the elder involved] and church leaders as they attempted to discuss with you plans for restoration within the Sojourn community. [Document significant sinful responses throughout the escalating church discipline process]. As a member of Sojourn, you covenanted to “follow the biblical procedures of church discipline and submit myself to discipline if the need should ever arise (Matthew 18:15-17; Galatians 6:1-5).”

[Broad Explanation of Two Biblical Options]

Given your refusal to repent and submit to the church, the elders present to you two biblical options: repent and work towards restoration with the church or refuse to repent and be removed from church membership and be treated as an unbeliever (Matt. 18:17).

[Option 1—Repentance and Restoration]

[Repentance]

What does repentance look like for you at this point? First, we pray the Lord would grant you the grace to repent (2 Tim. 2:24-26), which will compel you to not live for yourself but instead, live for Christ (2 Cor. 5:14-15). You will seek to love your wife like Christ (cf. Eph. 5:25-29; 1 Pet. 3:7; Eph. 5:1-2) with humility and gentleness (cf. 1 Cor. 13:4-7) and to shepherd your children in the Lord (Eph. 6:4b). You will willingly submit yourself to the restoration process outlined by the church leadership.

[Restoration]

A church leader, who will coordinate with the members in your community to love and restore you in the gospel, will lead the restoration process. As your church family, we want to walk with you as you work through the particular struggles that face you and your family. The Lord has truly blessed this communal approach to restoration and transformation.

[Option 2—Refusal to Repent]

[Warning of Removal from Membership & Implications]

[Name], if you refuse to repent, seek restoration, and submit to the elders for your care, we will carry out the last step of church discipline outlined in Matthew 18:17—we will treat you as an unbeliever.

Appendix 4: Warning Letter—for a Member (example letter, cont'd)

[Actions Steps Taken Against the Offender]

If you refuse to listen to the church, we will remove you from membership and we will no longer affirm you as a believer in Christ. You will not be allowed to partake in communion. You will not be allowed in any Sojourn community groups or in any church social gatherings. The elders will no longer be responsible for your soul but we will prayerfully hand you over to your flesh, the world, and Satan (1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:25-26), so the Lord might grant repentance. All steps taken by the church against you are designed to be restorative in nature so that you might be brought to repentance and your soul saved in the end (1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Tim. 2:25-26).

[Actions Steps Taken by the Church]

[Name], if you are removed from membership, we will ask the members of Sojourn to pray for you and to ask the Lord to bring you to repentance and back to Christ. We will inform our members that they are not permitted to associate with you and pretend everything is okay or normal in the midst of your rebellious and unrepentant posture towards God and the church. We will inform our members that they are permitted to associate with you only for the purpose of admonishment and restoration (2 Thess. 3:15; Gal. 6:1-2). They will also be instructed to call you back to Christ by faith and repentance with gospel intentionality, humility, and grace that both comforts and challenges with the goal of redemption.

[Process of Restoration Upon Repentance]

At some point in the future, if sincere repentance is evidenced through changed affections towards God and changed actions and attitude towards others, to include confession of sin and asking for forgiveness, the elders will make steps to restore you back to church membership.

Individuals, couples, and/or community group will be coordinated to offer redemptive help focused primarily on your relationship with God and secondarily, on how the gospel calls you to relate to others—friends, spouse, children, extended family, and others as appropriate. Such a process may take weeks or months depending on the severity and duration of the struggle.

You will need to attend the membership classes again, go through a membership interview with an elder, and sign the Membership Agreement Form, which acknowledges you understand and submit to the biblical guidelines of the Church Covenant and by-laws.

The elders will arrange to announce your restoration to fellowship in a community group or member's meeting, based on the extent of the church discipline, so that we can rejoice and celebrate God's mercy (Luke 15:3-7; 15:11-32).

[Deadline Date and Contact Person]

[Name], we encourage you to prayerfully consider the two biblical options we put before you. We pray you will respond to our plea for your repentance by turning to Christ as your only hope. If you desire to repent and take steps towards restoration in community under the oversight of the elders, please contact [elder leading this disciplinary case] as soon as possible to set up a meeting. If you do not contact [elder] by this Sunday, June 21, 2009 by 5:00pm, we will understand you refuse to abide to the conditions of this letter and the elders will vote to remove you from membership.

Closing

[Name], please know we love you and desire for you to experience the joy of your salvation in Christ. Seek the Lord for wisdom and grace. Seek Christ, for he is calling you to come to him in the midst of your pain, your weariness, and your confusion (cf. Matt. 11:28-30).

Grace and Peace in Christ,

The Elders of Sojourn

Appendix 5: Initial Warning Letter—for a Regular Attendee

A regular attendee who is unrepentant needs to be addressed biblically in the same manner as a member to protect the unity and purity of the church, as well as to encourage the person to repent and submit to Christ by faith. Since the attendee is not a covenanted member, the church discipline process requires an additional step to (1) remove any doubt the attendee in question is aware of the church covenant and by-laws regarding church discipline and (2) shift the initiative back to the attendee to positively affirm consent to discipline by his/her continued attendance rather than a signature on the Sojourn Membership Agreement Form.

The following letter serves as an example of what is included in the initial warning letter to an unrepentant regular attendee:

Dear [Name],

[Opening]

With humility and love, we as the elders of Sojourn write you this letter to express our care for you in the midst of a difficult time. We recognize you are not a covenant member of Sojourn, but we serve as God's appointed leaders to watch over the members of the church, as well as those who attend regularly. In response to our attempts to guide you through your particular struggles while you have been a part of the Sojourn community, you have refused to listen to our encouragement and challenge in the gospel. Despite not being a member, you are exerting influence on our members through your disobedience to God and his word. As a result, the elders want to make another formal appeal to you.

[Explanation of Church Membership Covenant and Discipline Process]

At Sojourn, we ask those who desire to join and commit to our church sign a Membership Agreement Form as a way to "indicate [one's] agreement with the church by-laws, doctrinal statement, and covenant, and agree to live, teach, and provide counsel in accordance with and not contrary to these documents." Both the church covenant and by-laws contain information regarding church discipline.

Church discipline must be understood within the gospel reality that God lovingly disciplines his children so that they may grow in grace for the sake of righteousness and peace found in Christ. The church discipline we carry out at Sojourn is a reflection of and a means for how God disciplines his children as an expression of his love, and also serves to protect the unity and purity of His church.

Given your unrepentance and unwillingness to submit to church leadership, we are called by God to journey with you in a more formal way to help you see the love of God and your need to repent and seek Christ. Such disciplinary efforts are a demonstration of God's love and serves as His appointed means to bring us back to himself as we are all prone to be blind to our own sinfulness, especially when we stray from Him.

We want you to be aware that your continued participation in Sojourn's gatherings will constitute your consent to the disciplinary process despite not having signed the Membership Agreement Form.

[Deadline Date and Contact Person]

[Name], please ask the Lord for the grace necessary to step out in faith and walk with us through this time of struggle for the purpose of redemption and restoration. Please contact [elder] by this Sunday, June 21, 2009 by 5:00pm, so we can set up a time to meet with you and discuss these matters in person.

[Closing]

[Name], know we love you and desire for you to experience the joy and freedom found in Christ and his gospel. Seek the Lord for wisdom and grace. Seek Christ, for he is calling you to come to him in the midst of your pain, your weariness, and your confusion (cf. Matt. 11:28-30).

Grace and Peace in Christ,

The Elders of Sojourn

Appendix 6: Last Warning Letter—for a Regular Attendee (components)

Date

Name

Address

City, State Zip Code

Dear [Name],

Opening

History of Scriptural Violations (*this section will contain the most customized details*)

History of Redemptive Attempts & Subsequent Responses (*this section will contain the most customized details*)

Broad Explanation of Two Biblical Options

Option 1—Repentance and Restoration

Briefly Explain Repentance Process

Briefly Explain Restoration Process

Option 2—Refusal to Repent—

Warning to Prohibit Participation in Sojourn Gatherings

Actions Steps Taken Against the Offender

Actions Steps Taken by the Church

Process of Restoration Upon Repentance

Deadline Date and Contact Person

Closing

Grace and Peace in Christ,

The Elders of Sojourn

Appendix 6: Warning Letter—for a Regular Attendee (example letter)

Date

Name

Address

Louisville, KY Zip Code

Dear [Name],

We greet you in the name of Christ. As pastors of Sojourn, we come to you with heavy hearts, guided by the Word and Spirit of God. Your refusal to meet face-to-face requires us to write this letter which serves as a final warning in the progressive church discipline process found in Matthew 18:15-20. Even though you are not a member of Sojourn, your continued participation in our gatherings constitute consent to the church discipline process per Sojourn's by-laws, as described in the initial letter we sent to you two weeks ago.

[History of Scriptural Violations]

Through a course of events culminating in March 2009, it was revealed you were guilty of [biblical sin(s)] (Scriptural reference) and refused to take radical steps to avoid further temptations (Matt. 5:29-30). During this time, you have not cared for your wife and children (1 Tim. 5:8; Eph. 5:22ff; 6:4; Dt. 6:5-9). You have not submitted to members and church leadership encouragement to repent and follow Christ through faith and obedience (Matt. 18:15-17; Heb. 13:17). We as elders are accountable by God to care for the members of his body (Acts 20:28-31).

[History of Redemptive Attempts & Subsequent Responses]

You refused to listen to [Friend A] and [Friend B] as they confronted you in love (Matt. 18:16) and refused to listen to [the elder involved] and church leaders as they attempted to discuss with you plans for restoration within the Sojourn community. [Document significant sinful responses throughout the escalating church discipline process]. As a regular attendee of Sojourn, you are ultimately accountable to the elders per the by-laws despite not being a covenant member since the elders are responsible to oversee the purity and unity of the church (Acts 20:28-31; Heb. 13:17).

[Broad Explanation of Two Biblical Options]

Given your refusal to repent and submit to the church, the elders present to you two biblical options: repent and work towards restoration with the church or refuse to repent and be prohibited from participation in Sojourn gatherings and be treated as an unbeliever (Matt. 18:17).

[Option 1—Repentance and Restoration]

[Repentance]

What does repentance look like for you at this point? First, we pray the Lord would grant you the grace to repent (2 Tim. 2:24-26), which will compel you to not live for yourself but instead, live for Christ (2 Cor. 5:14-15). You will seek to love your wife like Christ (cf. Eph. 5:25-29; 1 Pet. 3:7; Eph. 5:1-2) with humility and gentleness (cf. 1 Cor. 13:4-7) and to shepherd your children in the Lord (Eph. 6:4b). You will willingly submit yourself to the restoration process outlined by the church leadership.

[Restoration]

A church leader, who will coordinate with the members in your community to love and restore you in the gospel, will lead the restoration process. As the church family with whom you have chosen to associate, we want to walk with you as you work through the particular struggles that face you and your family. The Lord has truly blessed this communal approach to restoration and transformation.

[Option 2—Refusal to Repent]

[Warning to Prohibit Participation in Sojourn Gatherings]

[Name], if you refuse to repent, seek restoration, and submit to the elders for your care, we will carry out the last step of church discipline outlined in Matthew 18:17—we will treat you as an unbeliever.

Appendix 6: Warning Letter—for a Regular Attendee (example letter, cont'd)

[Actions Steps Taken Against the Offender]

If you refuse to listen to the church, we will prohibit you from further participation with our church gatherings. You will not be allowed to partake in communion. You will not be allowed in any Sojourn community groups or in any church social gatherings. The elders will no longer be responsible for your soul as a regular attendee but we will prayerfully hand you over to your flesh, the world, and Satan (1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:25-26), so the Lord might grant repentance. All steps taken by the church against you are designed to be restorative in nature so that you might be brought to repentance and your soul saved in the end (1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Tim. 2:25-26).

[Actions Steps Taken by the Church]

[Name], if you are prohibited from further participation, we will ask the members of Sojourn to pray for you and to ask the Lord to bring you to repentance and back to Christ. We will inform our members that they are not permitted to associate with you and to pretend everything is okay or normal in the midst of your rebellious and unrepentant posture towards God and the church. We will inform our members that they are permitted to associate with you only for the purpose of admonishment and restoration (2 Thess. 3:15; Gal. 6:1-2). They will also be instructed to call you back to Christ by faith and repentance with gospel intentionality, humility, and grace that both comforts and challenges with the goal of redemption.

[Process of Restoration Upon Repentance]

At some point in the future, if sincere repentance is evidenced through changed affections towards God and changed actions and attitude towards others, to include confession of sin and asking for forgiveness, the elders will make steps to restore you, and begin the steps towards church membership.

Individuals, couples, and/or community group will be coordinated to offer redemptive help focused primarily on your relationship with God and secondarily on how the gospel calls you to relate to others—friends, spouse, children, extended family, and others as appropriate. Such a process may take weeks or months depending on the severity and duration of the struggle.

You will need to attend the membership classes again, go through a membership interview with an elder, and sign the Membership Agreement Form, which acknowledges you understand and submit to the biblical guidelines of the Church Covenant and by-laws.

The elders will arrange to announce your restoration to fellowship in a community group or member's meeting, based on the extent of the church discipline, so that we can rejoice and celebrate God's mercy (Luke 15:3-7; 15:11-32).

[Deadline Date and Contact Person]

[Name], we encourage you to prayerfully consider the two biblical options we put before you. We pray you will respond to our plea for your repentance by turning to Christ as your only hope. If you desire to repent and take steps towards restoration in community under the oversight of the elders, please contact [elder leading this disciplinary case] as soon as possible to set up a meeting. If you do not contact [elder] by this Sunday, June 21, 2009 by 5:00pm, we will understand you refuse to abide to the conditions of this letter and the elders will prohibit you from being a part of the Sojourn community.

Closing

[Name], please know we love you and desire for you to experience the joy and freedom found in Christ and his gospel. Seek the Lord for wisdom and grace. Seek Christ, for he is calling you to come to him in the midst of your pain, your weariness, and your confusion (cf. Matt. 11:28-30).

Grace and Peace in Christ,

The Elders of Sojourn