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## MINISTRIES OF THE CHURCH:

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### *Church Discipline*

#### **The reasons church discipline is necessary:**

The church is a family (Eph. 2:19), and as such there are times when discipline needs to occur. Discipline in itself is not a bad thing. In reality, it is an act of love, for even God disciplines His children for their own good because He loves them (Heb. 12:4-11). His discipline is a form of training by which His children "may share His holiness" and yields "the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Heb. 12:10-11). Therefore if God disciplines those whom He loves for their good, the church is to do the same.

There are various reasons why the church may need to discipline believers. Regarding the believer himself, the purpose is twofold: 1) to shame him (2 Thes. 3:14-15); and 2) to restore him (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1; Jam. 5:19-20). When a person falls into sin and does not repent, he is to be put out of the church (1 Cor. 5:9,11,13) which will result in him being shamed. The ultimate goal of doing this is to bring him to the point of repentance and restoration. It is important to remember though, that when a believer is put out of the church, it is not to treat him like an enemy (2 Thes. 3:15). He is to be treated like an unbeliever (1 Cor. 5:13), yet be admonished like a brother (2 Thes. 3:15).



There are six additional reasons why church discipline is necessary. These reasons are actually more important than the restoration of the erring believer. If church discipline does not take place when it should, much more is at stake than just the believer turning from his sin. The first and ultimate purpose for carrying out church discipline is for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31; cf. Titus 2:6-8; Eph. 4:30). All that we do is to glorify Him, and this includes dealing with sin in the body of Christ. So if there is sin in the body which is not properly disciplined, it will not be glorifying God. As a result, the Holy Spirit will be grieved (Eph. 4:30), and the opponents of the gospel will be able to speak unfavorably about God's children for the sin within the body of Christ (cf. Titus 2:6-8). Only the removal of the sin from the body will bring glory to God.

The next reason for church discipline is the protection of its church members (Acts 20:28-30; 1 Pet. 5:2). Church leaders are required by God to protect their flock from harm. They are to deal strongly and appropriately with people in the church -- believers and unbelievers -- who are harming them (cf. Acts 20:28-30; 2 Pet. 2:1).

Therefore, a so-called brother (cf. 1 Cor. 5:11) who is in sin and will not repent may not actually be a believer at all. He may be an unbeliever who is trying to destroy the church, posing as a servant of righteousness when in actuality he is a servant of the devil (2 Cor. 11:13-15; cf. 1 Cor. 3:16-17). Such a one is crafty and needs to be dealt with quickly and with wisdom (cf. 1 Cor. 5:11,13).

Purification is another reason for church discipline (1 Cor. 5:7; 1 John 2:18-19; cf. Acts 5:1-11). The issue of purification is closely related to protection, but it has a slightly different nuance. Whereas protection is safeguarding the members of the church from harm, purification is cleansing the church from sin, which like leaven can grow. Sin which is not confronted can be a catalyst for other believers to use for justification to engage in the same sin because it has been allowed to continue within the church (cf. 1 Cor. 5:1-2). This can happen when an erring believer is not disciplined and allowed to live in his sin because there are no ramifications (cf. 1 Tim. 5:20). King Solomon agreed with this conclusion when he said: "Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil" (Eccl. 8:11). But when others in the church see straying believers disciplined by the church, this will cause them to reconsider their actions. They will realize that God desires them to live holy lives and that unrepentant sin is considered a serious matter by the church. Thus the leaven will be prevented from spreading throughout the body (1 Cor. 5:7). Yet sin which is allowed will spread within the church (1 Cor. 5:6) and have devastating affects. This is why the person who claims to be a Christian and will not repent from his sin (1 Cor. 5:11) is to be placed outside the church (1 Cor. 5:13). He is not to be allowed to attend the services of the church and is to be treated as an unbeliever (Mat. 18:17). Because he is a brother, or so-called brother, believers are not to have any fellowship with him (1 Cor. 5:11). Please note that these instructions are only for believers and not for unbelievers (1 Cor. 5:9-10,12).

Unity in the local church is also why church discipline is to be practiced (Titus 3:10-11). Believers are to be "diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). It is love that brings unity to the body (Col. 3:14). Therefore, a factious man who is not acting out of love but is causing disunity within the church, is to be warned swiftly to stop. He is to be given just two warnings; and if he does not abide, he is to be put out of the church because he is perverted and sinning. He has condemned himself.

The testimony of the local church and of its individual members in the community is yet another reason why sin is not to be allowed to be practiced in the church (1 Pet. 2:12). It is important that believers exemplify excellent behavior in the world. When such behavior is manifested, even though unbelievers may slander them unjustly, they will only be able to give God the glory for their good works at Christ's return (cf. Php. 2:9-11; Titus 2:6-8). Yet if believers are manifesting the deeds of the flesh (cf. Gal 5:17-21), one day they will in shame have to answer to their Savior (cf. 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 John 2:28). Therefore, discipline when exercised in the local church, will improve the reputation of the church.

The final reason for carrying out church discipline is to be obedient to the Word of God (Jam. 4:17; cf. John 13:17). Church discipline is commanded in the Scriptures; and if an individual or a church does not carry it out when necessary, they are sinning because they are not doing what is right. Such negligence will negatively impact that local church and possibly even the community in which it is located.

Therefore church leaders need to be obedient and exercise church discipline when necessary, no matter who the brother is who is involved in sin (cf. Jam. 2:1) and no matter how difficult the process may be.

### **When should the process of church discipline be implemented?**

Church discipline is a process which is intended for the glory of God, for the health of the church, and for the restoration of the individual in sin. The question then is: "What sins and/or in what situations should the process of church discipline be initiated? The following principles will help in giving guidance in this matter:

1. The person's sin has the potential of negatively influencing the church if it is not addressed (1 Cor. 5:6-7)
2. The person's sin is habitual and considered a deed of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21); wicked behavior (cf. 1 Cor. 5:13) which is completely unacceptable for believers (1 Cor. 5:11)
3. The person's sin is causing division in the body of Christ (Titus 3:10-11; cf. Gal. 5:20)
4. The person is leading an undisciplined life (2 Thes. 3:6-14; cf. 1 Tim. 5:8)

When a person is involved in sin, individuals or church leaders can evaluate the sin in light of these four principles. If the sin meets one or more of the criteria, then the church discipline process should be initiated. If it does not meet one or more of the criteria, then maybe this person simply needs someone to come alongside of him, and gently in love speak with him about the higher standard of living in accordance with the Word of God (Gal. 6:1-2; Jam. 5:19-20). In either case, the person who is attempting to correct the individual in sin should do so, not in hostility, but in humility, remembering his own frailty (cf. Rom. 6:19; 7:14-21; 1 Cor. 10:12). A person struggling in sin may be helped through counseling or discipleship as well.

Church discipline is to be initiated when any "so-called" brother is involved in a sin which needs correction (1 Cor. 5:11). Even if there is doubt whether a person is a true believer or not, if he claims to be a Christian and is involved in a type of sin which requires discipline, the church should discipline him. If on the other hand he does not claim to be a believer but is involved in a sin that would normally be disciplined, the church is not to discipline him. Instead the church needs to try to reach him with the gospel so that he will be saved and turn from his sin (1 Cor. 5:9-10,12). If however his sin is one that is negatively impacting the church (e.g., leading people away from the faith, attempting to lead people into sexual sin, causing division, etc.), he needs to be confronted about it. If he is still unwilling to stop practicing it, he may need to be asked to stop attending the church. The church needs to protect itself from those who would harm it as stated earlier (Acts 20:28-30).

What should be done when a person who is practicing sin which meets the criteria above yet wants to stop practicing it, but is having difficulty doing so? Should church discipline be initiated with this person immediately? It depends upon the situation. If the person is in any way harming the church and has not evidenced an appropriate amount of effort needed to change, then he must be put out of the church until he repents. But, if his sin is not known by the church at large and is not negatively impacting the church, then the pastor can take time to work with him to help him through a process of complete repentance. Yet if through such counseling

the person never does come to repentance, then eventually the church discipline process needs to occur. Therefore, please note that this process could take weeks, depending upon the situation. Patience needs to be a part of this process, and the steps of this process should not be rushed through, unless of course the situation calls for it. Since the restoration of the believer is the final objective, the church leaders need to be careful not to create a situation where irreparable damage is done. Church discipline is a family matter, and as a loving father disciplines his child, so must loving church leaders discipline straying sheep. Moving through this process in a hasty and unloving manner could negatively impact not only the individual spiritually, but the church as well, marring its reputation in the community. That is why this process must be characterized by love, compassion and patience. Anything less than this is irresponsible behavior on the part of the church leaders.

### **What is the process of church discipline?**

As stated above, church discipline is always to be approached with an attitude of love and humility, with patience, looking for the restoration of the believer. Again, the person initiating this process and those who may become involved also need to remember their own frailty as sinners.

When one believer is aware of another believer involved in sin which would fall under one or more of the criteria listed above, it is his responsibility to go to that person and reprove him. This is the first step in a four-step process which Jesus spoke about to His disciples as recorded in Matthew 18. Jesus made it clear that the believer who witnesses (the reprovor) a brother in sin is not to go to others and talk to them about the erring brother, but he is to speak directly to his erring brother (vs. 15). If as a result of this encounter the erring brother repents, then the process ends and no one else need know about this encounter.

If however the brother in sin does not listen to his reprovor and continues in sin, the reprovor is to take the process to the next step. He is to go once again to the erring brother, but this time he is to take one or two witnesses with him (vs. 16). It is of course helpful if the witnesses have observed the sin themselves, but this is not necessary. It is also beneficial if one of the witnesses is the pastor of the one in sin or one of his church elders. As witnesses, it is their role to witness this second encounter when once again the reprovor attempts to convince his erring brother to repent. It is the task of the witnesses to confirm the facts to make sure that the reprovor is correct in his accusations. If as a result of this encounter the erring brother repents, then the process ends and no one else needs to know about this except for those involved up to this point. If however he does not repent, then once again this process is to be taken to a higher level where this issue is to be brought before the church (vs. 17).

This third step is the highest level of church discipline. In this step, the brother in sin is once again given the opportunity to repent, but this time before a gathering of the church members. It is here that the reprovor testifies about what he has seen in the life of his erring brother, how he has approached him on two occasions, appealing to him to repent, and how both attempts have failed. It is then that the witnesses will testify about their encounter in the second step of this process and the associated facts. If as a result of this the brother in sin repents, then the process ends and

the brother is restored. If he does not repent, then the discipline proceeds to the final step.

The last step in this process for the church is when the brother in sin does not repent. In such a case, the erring brother is to be put out of the church (vs. 17; cf. Eccl. 8:11). In other words, he is not to be allowed to attend its services until he repents. The Apostle Paul exhorted the Corinthians about this matter when he said: "I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people... For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within *the church*? But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES" (1 Cor. 5:9,12-13). When this step is completed, the church is to treat the so-called brother as an unbeliever ("as a Gentile and a tax collector"; Mat. 18:17), though he is to be admonished like a brother (2 Thes. 3:15). The word "remove" has the idea of expelling someone, separating them from something and driving them away, getting rid of them. For example, if someone asked you to "remove" an object from a room, you would place it outside of the room, separating it from the place where it once was so that it would no longer be a part of its previous surroundings. In the same way, a disciplined believer is to be separated from the church and not be allowed to be a part of it until he repents. As a result of this process, the erring brother will no longer be under the protection of the church, but will be open to the discipline of God (cf. Heb. 12:4-11) and the attack of Satan (cf. 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Pet. 5:8). Finally, the believers in his church are not to fellowship with him; actually, they are "not even to eat with such a one" (1 Cor. 5:9,11).

Why is he to be put out of the church and not allowed to attend its services? Because doing this will shame him (2 Thes. 3:14-15); and since he cannot return to his church family until he repents, this should cause the true believer to want to turn from his sin and be reconciled with his church family.

How is the disciplined believer to be treated "as a Gentile and a tax collector"? By treating him with love -- the way a believer would treat any other unbeliever. Yet there is not to be any kind fellowship with him since he is being treated as an unbeliever, "...for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? (2 Cor. 6:14). Also when appropriate, the believer should try to witness to him as he would to an unbeliever.

Though some believe that the one under church discipline should be allowed to attend the services of the church so that he will be under the teaching of the Word of God and repent, this is an incorrect view as has been shown above. The Holy Spirit is able to convict him of his need to repent in order to be reconciled to his church; that is His ministry (John 16:8). Therefore as 1 Corinthians 5:9,13 teaches, believers should have no fellowship with him, and he should be placed outside the church. However, when he does repent, he is to be allowed back into the fellowship of the church, and the church's love for him is to be affirmed so that he will not "be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow" (2 Cor. 2:5-11).

In regards to the completion of the church discipline process when the brother in sin has been put out of the church, Jesus stated in Matthew 18:18: "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." In other words, this action taken by the church is recognized as binding before God. Then when the church releases this person from church discipline and he is restored to his church family, this

action also is recognized by God. Jesus then states in verses 19 and 20: "Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst." Though many understand these two verses as a separate thought which is not related to the issue of church discipline, this is not correct. Jesus is continuing His instruction from the previous context. What He is saying is that when an agreement is made to place a sinning believer out of the church or accept him back into the assembly (a decision which is to be made by the church leaders), Jesus -- being in their midst in this process -- is the reason that their decision is binding. Therefore, church discipline is not a matter to be taken lightly because it is not just a decision of the church since Jesus is involved in the process as well.

What should church leaders do if in the midst of the church discipline process the erring brother resigns his membership and leaves the church? Should they pursue the believer and continue the church discipline process to the end? What the church does in such a case needs to be determined according to the situation at hand. By the very fact that the brother in sin left the church shows that he is in an unrepentant state, not wanting to change his ways and walk in a manner worthy of Christ (Eph. 4:1; Php. 1:27; Col. 1:10; 1 Thes. 2:12). He then is out from under the protection of the church and is open to further discipline by God (Heb. 12:4-11), as well as to the attack of Satan (cf. 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Pet. 5:8). Therefore since he is unrepentant and has left the church, no longer in fellowship, the immediate goal of the discipline has been accomplished. It is then up to the church leaders to notify their members that this person is no longer in fellowship with them. They do not need to state the specific nature as to why the person left, but simply say that he has left, not being in harmony with the church and its leadership. If the church leaders find out later that this person is attending another Christian church after leaving theirs due to the discipline process, they should notify the leaders of that church so that they are aware of the situation and can continue the discipline process. However, the other church may not want to cooperate.

### **Does the church discipline process always have to follow the format outlined in Matthew 18?**

Though the Matthew 18 format is the preferred method of dealing with an erring brother and should be used in most cases, there may be times when more drastic measures need to be taken. One example would be in the case of a person who is causing division within the church. Paul told Titus that a factious man should be rejected after having received a first and second warning. He is then to be put out of the church, "knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned" (Titus 3:10-11). This situation falls one step short of approaching a brother in sin according to Matthew 18. Also, there may be situations where it is not wise for just one person to reprove another alone, such as in a situation where a man must reprove an adulteress. Or possibly when one person must reprove a violent man for his anger. It may be better if another person accompanies the reprover in such cases. However, it is always best to follow the Matthew 18 process when possible.

## **Summary:**

Church discipline can be a very difficult process for a church to go through. Sometimes a church may have to discipline its pastor or an elder, a powerful man within the church and/or community, an elderly person, an individual who is loved by all, or even a close friend. Whoever it is, church leaders need to be faithful to the task at hand, being concerned for the honor of God, the health and testimony of the church, and the spiritual condition of the person involved. Leviticus 19:15-16 states: "You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly. You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people, and you are not to act against the life of your neighbor; I am the LORD" (cf. Exo. 23:1-3). The church should never be daunted from its task because of who the person is who is being disciplined, for "the fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted" (Pro. 29:25). Yet on the other hand, church discipline should never be used as a tool for control and/or retribution by the pastor or church board. Such conduct is deplorable. Church discipline, when used wrongly, can ruin a person's reputation and shatter his faith to a point where he can become despondent to the things of God, which will negatively affect his whole life. Doing such a thing to a child of God will have to one day be accounted for by those responsible. Therefore, the process of church discipline should always be entered into prayerfully and carefully so that the end result is one in which God is glorified.





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## APPLICATION QUESTIONS:

1. Has your church ever carried out church discipline? If so, what were the circumstances which surrounded the most recent incident?
2. Is your church quick to carry out church discipline, or is it slow to begin this process? Do you think that the speed in which your church carries out church discipline is timely? Or do changes need to be made? Please explain your answer.
3. When an erring brother who appears before your church refuses to repent, does your church allow this person to continue to attend its services? Will this practice change as a result of 1 Corinthians 5:9,11-13? Please explain.
4. How would you apply this phrase, "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (Mat. 18:17), to a brother whom your church has disciplined and put out of the church?
5. How would you counsel a Christian wife to treat her husband, and/or believing children to treat their father, who has been disciplined and placed out of the church?

6. What process would you go through if another church contacted you and told you that a person who recently began attending your church is under discipline at their church? In one word, what would be the ultimate goal of this process?

Ultimate goal: \_\_\_\_\_

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7. What would you do if you had to discipline the pastor of your church, an elder, a popular person, a rich man, or your best friend? Please keep in mind Exodus 23:1-3 and Leviticus 19:15-16.

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### **SPECIFIC QUESTIONS FOR CROSS-CULTURAL MISSIONARIES AND CHURCH PLANTERS:**

1. Have you considered the ramifications of carrying out church discipline, such as what this may mean to the person being disciplined, to those close to him, to your church and to yourself? This is what makes carrying out church discipline so difficult. Therefore please list things which you feel would be helpful for you to do now to prepare yourself spiritually and mentally before having to begin the process of church discipline. Considering this now when you are able to think about it objectively is far better than trying to prepare when you find yourself in the midst of an actual case of church discipline.

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2. Many times a pastor will be spoken against negatively in the community by the person whom the church disciplined and/or by those close to him. How would you handle this situation if this were to happen to you? Scripturally, what should be your response?

3. A church planter or missionary of a new church may find himself having to carry out church discipline by himself because he has not yet had the time to develop qualified leaders to stand with him in this situation. This can be a very difficult and trying time for him. How would you handle this emotionally? What might be some other options for you so that you would not have to do this alone?