

Redemptive Church Discipline (A.K.A. Redemptive Course Correction)

What does the typical process for church discipline look like?

Matthew 18:15-20 gives several theological principles for redemptive church discipline:

1. God's care and concern is such toward each of His individual children that if anyone of them strays into sin, then God has granted authority to the church to call that erring brother to repentance. This process of church discipline has several conditional steps.
 - **If** a brother sins **then** go and reprove him in private.
 - **If** he listens **then** you have won your brother.
 - **If** he does not listen **then** take one or two more witnesses.
 - **If** he refuses to listen to these witnesses **then** tell it to the church.
 - **If** he refuses to listen to the church **then** he is to be removed from membership.
2. God's presence is promised through the entire process of church discipline when implemented according to His biblical mandate.
3. The process of church discipline is to occur in a spirit of gentleness and humility with the goal of restoring a sinning brother back to his proper relationship with God and his fellow believers.

Why participate in the process of church discipline as a church?

*There are more reasons than these, but these are some of the main ones.

1. A church that does not biblically administer discipline is not a real church. God makes it clear that he intends various types of church discipline to be a part of church life. Matt. 18:15-19; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; 1 Tim 1:18-20, 5:20; Titus 3:10-11
2. A church that does not biblically administer discipline is not discipling. Discipline comes from the word disciple. That's why a church does discipline because it is part of the disciple making process. One aspect of discipleship is restoration of the believer(s) to the body (Gal. 6:1). Whether through gentle correction, admonition, rebuke, or being put out of fellowship with the church body, it is all done to restore the believer(s) to the body (1 Cor. 5:5).
3. A church that does not biblically administer discipline does not love its membership. The Bible says that God loves believers enough that when they are walking in rebellious sin from Him, He will discipline them and if He doesn't that means that He doesn't love them (Hebrews 12:5-17). It's real love for those that need it. "God's love is not a pampering love, it is a perfecting love". Discipline is commanded by Jesus and demanded of believers through church membership and is the most loving thing a church can do for a believer that is objectively straying from God after every phase of one on one, two to three and church admonishment has happened. So that when success is attained by the believer true godly sorrow and repentance has occurred.
4. A church that does not biblically administer discipline is an enemy of the gospel. Church discipline has the goal of reconciliation. Reconciliation is what we have with God through Jesus (2 Cor. 5:20-21). Furthermore, through Jesus two or more believers can have reconciliation with each other (2 Cor. 5:18 and 1 Cor. 7:11). For a believer to defiantly refuse reconciliation with God or with other believer because of rebellious ongoing sinfulness makes the believer an enemy of the gospel.

Who decides what is disciplinable?

Scripture decide what needs church discipline. Understand that for some sins there are different processes to accomplish success with church discipline, but for most issues of interpersonal conflict Matt. 18:15-17 is the standard. Here are the main scriptural reasons for church discipline. Notice that not all sins go directly to discipline immediately, but are brought to discipline through process and are typically not brought forward until a believer decides to live rebellious and not fight the sin anymore.

- a. When a Christian sins against another Christian, and will not repent and reconcile (Matt. 18:15-22)
- b. When a Christian lives in a sin habitually (especially when damaging) without repentance after much admonishment (Gal. 6:1- 5; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Cor. 2:5-11)
- c. When a Christian continually blasphemes God (1 Tim. 1:18-20).
- d. When a Christian encourages, debates or promotes false doctrine (Acts 20:25-31; Gal. 1:6-9; 1 Tim. 1:4-7; 4:1-8; 2 Tim. 2:14-26).
- e. When an pastor/elder/leader is in moral sin or doctrinal error (1 Tim. 5:19-21; James 3:1)
- f. When a Christian is divisive (Titus 3:10-11).
- g. When a Christian is an idle busybody (2 Thess. 3:6, 11).

How does the last phase of church discipline work?

Jesus instructed us to treat one who will not repent as “a Gentile and tax collector.” Gentiles refused God’s revelation and tax collectors were considered traitors. In Jewish society they would be the equivalent to what Judas was to Christ. Thus a disciplined believer is treated as an unbelieving, unrepentant outsider. Although putting them out of covenant membership, Christian fellowship, and disassociation may seem harsh, these responses are simply a means by which the individual in question may come to an acknowledgement of his or her sin and repent. They receive the compassion and urgency needed to encourage them to repent. They must not receive the fellowship of the church community that is reserved for fellow disciples and seekers. The idea is not that we stop caring for them, but that they sin and refuse to repent we must treat them as if they were enemies of the gospel. We find this sort of response in 1 Tim. 1:20, Titus 3:10, 1 Cor. 5:1-7 and 2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15.

Paul admonished church members in 2 Thessalonians 3:6 and 14 to withdraw from the brother that walks disobediently and to have nothing to do with him. First Corinthians 5:9-11 is the strongest of all these biblical admonitions, commanding us not to associate or share a meal with believers who are guilty of sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, revilement, drunkenness, or swindling. Because sharing a meal is symbolic of hospitable and cordial fellowship, it is not to be allowed under the circumstances. When you put a person out of the church fellowship, you don’t have him over for a meal unless it’s to discuss repentance or the gospel.

Even though we don’t have fellowship with unrepentant Christians, we do not regard them as personal enemies but as enemies of the gospel (2 Thess. 3:15). When we see them, we warn them as brothers that they are acting like enemies of the gospel. Until they repent we cannot pretend to be in fellowship with them.

There is a sense in which you never really let the unrepentant sinner go. Though you don’t associate with him or her, you keep calling them back through repentance. Practically speaking it is fine for you to see an unrepentant brother or sister as long as your speech or actions do not dismiss the gravity of the sin or imply that reconciliation has been completed when he or she has not yet

repented. He or she is a brother or sister in Christ, but because of their persistence in sin, they are separating themselves from the body.

How do we know we are doing the right thing?

When the process of church discipline is administered according to the scriptures and has received agreement among the witness that tried to mediate, then a church body can have full confidence that what they are doing is heavens will in earth. We find this truth found in Matt. 18:18-20. Many people take this portion of scripture and think it is referring to a small bible study or prayer meeting. The context concerns the issue of church discipline. Therefore, the witnesses and church can move forward with the issue of discipline with a covenant member when the process is handled according to the steps as laid out in the preceding verse 15-17. It is also important to remember that we must expel the sin from among us (1 Cor. 5:13) so the sin does not continue to grow, fester and do grave harm to the flock. It is absolutely imperative to take action against the sin so that others do not fall into the trap of the sin.

Does church discipline mean the disciplined member cannot come to public worship?

It all depends on the reason for discipline. If the disciplined covenant member is spreading heresy or causing ongoing conflict then it would be appropriate to remove them from not only all forms of fellowship, but also the worship services. However, if the disciplined covenant member were not causing ongoing dissension in the body or spreading heresy in many cases it is good that the disciplined covenant member continue coming to the public assembly of the church body for worship so that the preaching of the Word would work continual repentance in his or her life. However every case of church discipline is different and should be handled on a case by case basis.

Bear in mind that if a disciplined member were to be allowed to continue attending the public preaching and teaching worship services of the church that if he or she were to start at a later point causing conflict, disunity, dissension, become a corrupting influence or spread heresy that the elders man decide at that point to deny the discipline unrepentant person access to public worship as well.

If a disciplined covenant member is to be treated like an unbelieving, unrepentant outsider, then why are unbelievers still allowed to come to small groups and fellowships, but disciplined covenant members are not?

Considering the situation and wisdom of the elders at times the disciplined member can continue to come to the public preaching and teaching services of the church just as unbelievers in the Corinthian church were permitted to the public worship services (1 Cor. 14:23-25). However, if the disciplined unrepentant believer were to create disharmony, promote heresy, or influence other covenant members towards sinfulness, then it would be proper for the elders to even deny access to public preaching and teaching ministries of the church. In this kind of situation the scriptures charge elders to protect the church from corruption, heresy and disunity (Acts 20:25-31, 1 Tim. 1:18-20, Titus 3:10-11, Romans 16:17).

Are disciplined covenant members our enemies?

Certainly not! When a church disciplines a Christian it is doing this because it has the sinner's restoration in mind. In biblical church discipline the goal is to restore them to a right walk with God or perhaps they are not really believers and this process will show them the truth. Either way,

it is for their good. It would be accurate to say that a disciplined Christian is an enemy of the gospel (2 Thess. 3:14-15) because of their defiance to the God of the scriptures and the transforming work the gospel of Christ. When other believers come into contact with disciplined believers they should still be courteous and polite.

What happens if they repent?

If a disciplined believer were to repent and desire back into the fellowship of a church they would need to meet with the elders who were the witnesses to discuss the fruits of repentance and submit to the elders regarding steps towards restitution and repentance at the level the issue was handled. When a disciplined person has successfully done this, the church body is to welcome them back and make extraordinary effort to “reaffirm love, comfort, and forgive.” As the repentant believer is welcomed back into full fellowship all the privileges of fellowship are restored such as small groups, Lord’s Supper, fellowship opportunities, and ministry opportunities. In reality the question is not “if” this happens but “when” this happens if the disciplined person is a genuine believer (2 Cor. 2:5-9).

Will I be next?

If you are not a covenant member things will not usually proceed forward to the final steps of church discipline. Some of the beginning steps of one on one and two to three witnesses may be attempted regardless, but the process stops there because a non-covenant member has not agreed to the discipline.

However, if a non-covenant member were to habitually sin in areas causing heresy, disunity, dissension or corruption in the church body, some form of discipline might be needed so as to protect to purity and unity of the church body. Things of this matter are considered by a case by case basis by the elders as they commanded in the scriptures to protect and look out for the well being of the church body (Acts 20:25-31, Heb. 13:17).

Is church discipline only for divorce issues?

Not all divorce is sinful. There is a biblical divorce when there is unrepentant adultery or an unbeliever abandons the marriage (1 Cor. 7:12-16). However divorce for unbiblical reasons between believers is a clear testimony that unforgiveness and unreconciliation has happened. Thus the sin of an unbiblical divorce seems to catch the highest amount of church discipline because it is the easiest to recognize and objectively shows a lack of repentance and reconciliation for one or both of the marital parties.

Isn't church discipline something only a “legalistic” church would do?

Christian legalism means that you believe your salvation is accomplished by following the moral law of God as found in the New Testament. Basically it is salvation by works. Therefore, church discipline is not legalism or can even be considered “legalistic”.

Someone who sees church discipline as something negative might have an opinion that church discipline is cruel or unloving. However persons making such a statement often use their own reasoning or emotions as the standard for deciding their opinion and not the scriptures. If the scriptures were consulted and understood correctly then a person would have to admit that church discipline, when done biblically, is loving and merciful for the sinning believer.

