

Guidelines for Church Discipline

Christ the King Church, Denville NJ

At CTK, we understand church discipline to be a holistic, multi-faceted pursuit, one that has more to do with overall health and preventative Biblical medicine than with specific instances which might require corrective intervention. Though the term discipline is often understood primarily in a more punitive sense, it is in reality a term full of possibility and hope, as it has to do with the overall order and direction of the church community. Church discipline, Biblically understood, is a God-given means of ensuring that the community flourishes for His glory.

Understanding this, it is clear that discipline does, on occasion, include deliberate measures taken to address and correct persons who stray from our mutually agreed upon Biblical commitments. Yet even here—perhaps especially here—such discipline is full of possibility and hope—hope that the loved one would come to his or her senses and return home (Luke 15:17ff). Even in its most extreme form—the removal of a person from membership, church discipline must remain a matter of love from beginning to end, as the church seeks to rescue the offender from self-destruction, to protect others from confusion and danger and, of most consequence, to promote the honor and reputation of our Lord. Dismissal from membership, when it is deemed necessary, is done in sorrow and in the hope of restoration (I Corinthians 5:5; I Timothy 1:20; II Corinthians 2:5-11).

The threefold purpose of church discipline, then, is (1) the restoration and reconciliation of a believer who has gone astray (Matthew 18:15, Galatians 6:1, James 5:20); (2) to keep sin from spreading and thus harming or confusing others in the Church (1 Corinthians 5:2, 6-7 and 1 Timothy 5:20); and (3) to protect the purity of the church and the honor of Christ (Romans 2:24). Just as God our Father disciplines those whom He loves (Hebrews 12:6; Revelation 3:19), so the church seeks to discipline and restore the loved one who has gone astray. *“No 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* (Hebrews 12:11). Even if restoration does not come about, however, church discipline must be carried out to keep sin and error from spreading and to keep the church from tarnishing the reputation of our Lord Jesus.

Members of this church and all other professing Christians who regularly attend or fellowship with us who err in doctrine or who engage in conduct that violates Scripture or that seriously disturbs the peace, purity and unity of the church, shall be subject to church discipline. In Matthew 18:15-18, our Lord provides practical guidelines for restoring offenders and preserving order within the church. It is not meant as a “paint-by-numbers” kit to be applied the same way in all situations, but gives us a pattern of Biblical response and movement within which we seek wisdom in each situation.

We must, like our Lord, dwell with one another full of both grace and truth. Church discipline should normally begin, and hopefully end, with private counsel and encouragement, with the hope that the offender will turn from his or her error without public consequence (Matthew 18:15; Ephesians 4:15; II Timothy 2:24-26; Acts 18:24-26). We are “against” the offender in order to truly be “for” them, as it is the truth that sets us free (John 8:32). *“Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses”* (Proverbs 27:6).

It is always our responsibility to take initiative when a misunderstanding has taken place, regardless of our actual culpability (Matthew 5:23-24); we must all seek the ongoing peace and order of the church. Every member and regular attendee of this Church should seek to win their brother or sister over (Matthew 18:15) in a spirit of gentleness (Gal. 6:1). If anyone has knowledge of errant doctrine or misconduct they have the

duty to warn and correct the loved one in private (James 5:19-20; Ephesians 4:15). We should emulate our Good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus, who is eager to find and to rescue His lost sheep (Ezekiel 34:12, 16a; Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:3-7), to the point of laying his life down to save them (John 10:11).

If the offender is indifferent to this first level of discipline, our Lord gives us this counsel: "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'" (Matthew 18:16). The purpose of this second level of discipline is to first gain a more thorough understanding of the problem. Those confronting the alleged offender must listen carefully to his or her perspective concerning the problem, and be eager to relent if it becomes clear that a misunderstanding has occurred (Proverbs 18:13, 17). If the alleged offender has been falsely accused, this then becomes a new matter of careful instruction. In any conflict, it is good to remember that there is something for all parties to learn; our hearts should continually be broken and reshaped by the gospel. If the concern is valid, the purpose of this second stage of discipline is restoration and reconciliation or, in its absence, verification that the offense has indeed occurred or is ongoing.

These first and second levels of warning may occur within no specified time interval. Knowledge of the sin should be kept to the smallest group possible. If the erring individual does not heed these warnings, the matter should then be brought to the attention of the elders. The elders will make every reasonable effort to hear all sides of the issue and counsel appropriately. If the elders determine that an individual is guilty of violating Biblical standards in thought, word or deed, they will strive to work with and counsel him or her toward repentance, reconciliation and restoration. All counsel must be done earnestly, in a spirit of humility, gentleness, and hope (2 Timothy 2:24-26; 4:2; Gal. 6:1).

If the person refuses to cooperate with the elders—if they refuse to meet with them at all, or if they are indifferent to their counsel upon meeting so that it becomes obvious that they are refusing to repent, the elders will determine an appropriate level of discipline. This may include private or public rebuke, removal of responsibilities or privileges within the church or, in extreme cases, dismissal from church membership (Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 5:4-7, 13).

If this last level of discipline is deemed by the elders to be appropriate, and in accordance with Matthew 18:17, the elders may bring the matter before the congregation. This may be necessary because the problem has already become public knowledge; if so, the sin may be endangering or confusing others. It may also be necessary to inform the congregation of the problem in order to commend disciplinary action and give a rationale for its necessity. The purpose of this step, then, is to grant clarity and to dispel harmful misunderstanding, and to urge the members of the church to pray for and encourage the offender to repent. Such a meeting will also serve as a warning to all against falling into the similar sin (1 Tim. 5:20).

The Elders will seek to present the matter to the church with clarity, yet also take care not to set forth more information than necessary. There are two guidelines for necessary disclosure in a gathered meeting involving discipline; the church should know enough to (1) understand the nature of the offense and (2) be able to understand and support the discipline process. The person under discipline shall have opportunity to offer biblical justification for his or her conduct or doctrinal position at this last level of discipline and throughout the disciplinary process.

The public announcement may be made by letter, during a regular worship service, or at a special meeting. If the elders deem it best to hold a special meeting, they will seek to give the congregation notice at least two (2) weeks before the meeting is to take place. If the offense is such that it is likely to

harm or confuse others, lead them into sin, or cause division or disruption, the elders may accelerate these procedures in order to protect the Church.

If the offender refuses to listen to the church, and the elders thus determine that it is necessary to remove him/her from membership, they will recommend this to the church and seek to come to unity on this decision. If the majority of the gathered membership concur with the elder's assessment (II Corinthians 2:6), it then becomes the church's solemn obligation to dismiss the offender from the privileges of membership, and in particular from sharing in the Lord's Supper (Matthew 18:17; I Corinthians 5:4-7, 13). Until the offender takes steps of repentance, their brothers and sisters in the church should abstain from fellowship with them (I Corinthians 5:11; II Thessalonians 3:6; II John 10-11).

If the offender leaves the church during the disciplinary process, or after discipline has been pronounced (if the discipline falls short of dismissal), and the elders learn that he or she is attending another church, they may inform that church that the individual is currently under discipline. They may urge the church to encourage the offender to repent and be restored to the Lord and any people whom he or she has offended. Such communication enhances the possibility of repentance and serves to warn the other church to be on guard against the harm the offender might do in their midst.

At their discretion, the elders may institute restrictions on an individual pending the resolution of the disciplinary process. This may include suspension from ministry positions and responsibilities, and attendance at certain church functions and meetings.

If the offender repents at any time during or after this process, the elders will be eager to restore them to fellowship in the church (see Matt. 18:12-13; Luke 15:11-32). Convinced that the person has sincerely confessed their sins, and sought forgiveness from the person (or persons) offended as well as from God, and satisfied that he or she is committed to any appropriate restitution or counseling, the elders shall announce his or her restoration. This announcement will be made with joy, accompanied by a solemn admonition to the congregation that the loved one's offenses have been forgiven and are not to hinder their fellowship within the church. This does not preclude the person from being restricted from some areas of ministry and leadership, based on lack of Biblical qualifications or the continued need to protect others. The repentant person should be embraced with much affirmation and affection: "You ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you to...reaffirm your love for him" (II Corinthians 2:7-8).