

Church Discipline & Restoration Guidelines

Summary

The Elders and Pastors shall be held accountable for how they shepherd the souls of those who are entrusted to them (Hebrews 13:17). Part of shepherding requires rebuking and disciplining sin. Scripture describes and directs a process of the Church disciplining unrepentant Members, with the primary aim of repentance and spiritual restoration of a brother or sister in Christ (Matthew 18:15-17, 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, 2 Corinthians 2:6-11). Church discipline aims to demonstrate:

- Love for the individual, that he or she might be warned and with the aim that he or she would be brought to repentance and restoration (Matthew 18:10-17);
- Love for the Church, that its purity, health, and strength might be protected, since “a little leaven leavens the whole lump” (Galatians 5:9);
- Love for the watching world, that it might see Christ’s transforming power, and that our witness would not be hindered, tarnished, or discredited;
- Love for Christ, that His Church might uphold his holy name, obey Him, and so glorify Him.

In accordance with the biblical pattern generally outlined in Matthew 18:15-17 and in the spirit of love, a person who evidences such unrepentant sin shall be confronted by one or more Members in an initial one-on-one meeting, followed by escalating engagement by Elders and/or Pastors. Where the steps of discipline are exhausted in cases of continued unrepentant and/or habitual sin, the Elders and Pastors shall consider removing a person from service and/or Membership with the hope of eventual reconciliation and restoration. This removal may include a prohibition to attend Church gatherings and events, depending on the circumstances. In addition, it might include public disclosure of removal from Membership and the circumstances leading to this decision to the Members of the Church. Those so disciplined may in turn be restored to fellowship where the Elders and Pastors have determined that appropriate repentance has occurred.

Guiding Principles

- Always include clear evidence of sin and why it violates God’s Word.
- Always build a path toward restoration, i.e. make it easy for them to return, as in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:18-20).
- Certain sins or situations may expedite this process, though time and patience are always required while walking through this with others.
- Determining the presence or absence of repentance defines the pathway forward. Repentance = A pathway of restoration; unrepentance = a pathway of discipline. If at any point within the process outlined below genuine repentance of sin is displayed and evident, the progression towards discipline should change to a progression towards restoration.
- Do not neglect to care for the offended, whether directly or indirectly affected.
- Create a general statement that can be read at the “tell it to the Church” level.
- Written communication in the form of letters throughout this process are clear and helpful opportunities for repentance.

- For a helpful reference on flow and communication, reference the *Church Discipline Flow and Funnel of Communication* flowchart.

Step #1: Have a private conversation (Matthew 18:15)¹

- Everyday life within the Church, in the context of Small Groups and life-on-life. This is an informal process carried out by Church Members.
- Eliminate gossip or division. If you're not bringing resolution to the problem, you're part of the problem.
- Encourage godliness. All confrontation aims to lead to restoration and godliness.
- If repentance is evident, quickly restore after prayerful consideration.
- If repentance is not evident, proceed to Step #2.

Step #2: Take one or two others along (Matthew 18:16)

- Private but not informal. In-person is always best.
- Offended party + Small Group Leader or Flock Leader or another unaffected Gospel City Member in good standing
- Evaluate response and develop a care plan
 - With any disciplinary action, restitution is always the goal. The care plan should include both physical and relational restitution, where necessary. Restitution could look like a formal meeting to repent of sin, a letter of repentance, or financial compensation where any property damage occurred, amongst other options.
 - The Small Group Leader, Flock Leader, or unaffected Gospel City Member shall coordinate accountability and assign a date to continue check-ups to ensure forward progress.
- If repentance is evident, restore within days after prayerful consideration.
- If repentance is not evident, proceed to Step #3.

Step #3: Involve Elders and Pastors by informing them of the situation

- Elders and Pastors are informed and updated on status and progress as necessary (should be a formal process, i.e. coming to the meeting and recording the situation in the meeting minutes)
- Consider accusations to determine if the sin is concrete and/or serious enough for next steps of discipline.
- Determine next steps
 - The Elders and Pastors shall oversee and determine all next steps while receiving input and recommendations from the parties involved in the sinner's care.
 - With any intense situation, people often need time to process and respond appropriately. Time can help bring about heart-level change and allow for some decompression of the intense situation.
 - Give all parties involved (the sinner, the sinned against, and the leaders overseeing the situation) an appropriate amount of time to respond, which shall be determined by the Elders and Pastors.

¹ The following six (6) steps were developed with the help of 9Marks Step-by-Step Primer for Church Discipline (www.9marks.org/article/a-step-by-step-primer-for-church-discipline).

- It may be necessary to give care and counseling to the person sinned against as part of the process of the next steps.

Step #4: Give adequate notice to the one caught in sin

- Meet with the Elders and Pastors. Goal is to bring clarity to the sin as well as the path towards repentance.
- Verify and give notice. Given the need for clarity and precision in communication, the initial contact should probably be written communication in the form of a letter (Letter #1) calling the individual to repent and return, followed up by a phone call or a personal meeting. This process is necessary to make sure the one caught in sin is informed and given time to repent.
- Explain the accusations. Ensure the one caught in sin understands the accusations and the potential consequences of their choices (removal from small group attendance, removal from service, removal from church attendance, go attend Biblical Soul Care, etc).
- If repentance is evident, restore within days after prayerful consideration.

Step #5: Tell it to the Church (Matthew 18:17)

- Prior to “telling it to the church,” give another opportunity to repent by sending the individual another letter (Letter 02) that calls him to repent and warns him that if repentance is absent, we plan to communicate his sin to the church. Be transparent with plans.
- If repentance is still not present, communicate the necessary information regarding the situation to the core group, in the appropriate context. The core group and appropriate context are determined by the level the specific sin has affected others as well as the position within the body of Christ the sinner holds.
- Core groups and appropriate contexts include, but are not limited to: an informal gathering of only those immediately affected, a small group meeting, a Flock meeting, a Members email, or a Members Meeting.
- To warrant this step, the sin must be outward and significant and the sinner must continue to walk in unrepentance. A significant sin with continued unrepentance makes it difficult to continue believing someone bears the Spirit of God and submits to the Lordship of Jesus.
- Communicate enough to understand, without divulging unhelpful details. The core group should understand but still leave room for repentance and restoration.
- Pray without ceasing. Since each person is one decision away from failure, all in attendance should be:
 - Reminded to pray for the hopeful repentance and restoration of the sinner;
 - Warned of the seriousness and danger of sin;
 - Cautioned not to gossip;
 - Encouraged to reach out to the individual and call him to repentance, if they have a relationship with him.
- If repentance is evident, enter into a 6-month MIN process of restoration.
- If repentance is not evident, proceed to Step #6.

Step #6: Remove the unrepentant person from Church Membership (Matthew 18:17)

- Inform the core group. Let them know that a Member of the Church is being removed from fellowship and what their response needs to be.
- Interact with the sinner. Where the individual allows interaction, it is best to inform of the process taking place. In addition, send the individual a letter (Letter 03) that informs him of their membership removal.
- Follow up with the rest of the Members of the Church. Not as much info as given to the core group, but many will know and be affected, so some information helps ensure gossip does not occur. All in attendance should be:
 - Reminded to pray for the hopeful repentance and restoration of the sinner;
 - Warned of the seriousness and danger of sin;
 - Cautioned not to gossip.
- Be sure to officially remove the individual from Membership at Gospel City Church.
- There are certain sins or situations that may require the sinner to be removed from church attendance for an extended season. If repentance is evident, walk him to another church and ensure leadership is informed of the situation. If repentance is not evident, consider warning the surrounding churches for the protection of the body of Christ universal.