

MPBC CHURCH DISCIPLINE AND RESTORATION

What is church discipline?

In its broadest sense, church discipline is the whole complex of teaching, preaching, structures, practices, and censures which clarifies acceptable behavior from that which is unacceptable for members of a local church.

Mark Dever in his book *The Deliberate Church* likens discipline within the body of Christ to discipline in our physical bodies and suggests 2 kinds of discipline. First, there is formative discipline, which for the physical body is eating right and exercising. In the body of Christ formative discipline is how the church gets in shape, stays in shape, and grows. Therefore, preaching, teaching, discipling, Bible study groups, and corporate worship are examples of formative discipline.

Second is corrective discipline, which for the physical body would be surgery, it corrects something that has gone wrong in the body so that more serious injury does not happen. Within the body of Christ, rebuke, admonition and excommunication (removal from the church rolls and prohibition of taking the Lord's Supper) are examples of corrective discipline that correct the errors of doctrine and/or lifestyle.

Church discipline is the confrontive and corrective measures taken by individuals, church leaders, or the congregation regarding a matter of sin in the life of a believer. The activity of discipline is a part of the process of discipleship and has the very same goal – the growth and maturity of the believer. In other words, church discipline's main objective is NOT punitive but restorative – the restoration of the unrepentant believer to a safe, productive lifestyle of godly service and relationship to Jesus Christ.

Church discipline is not evidence of judgmentalism or hatred, but evidence of love. True love in the context of the local church is so faithful to God that it cannot give license to sin – those who continue in open, offensive, defiant, and immoral conduct. The experience of discipline described in 1 Corinthians 5 was intended for the good of the offender (5:1-5), for the good of the congregation (5:6-8), and for the good of the surrounding community (5:9-13).

Why is it needed?

No doubt the task of church discipline is difficult, awkward, and time consuming, but we must practice it as a church of Jesus Christ that holds to the authority of Scripture.

1. Bible commands it – 1 Cor 15:1-13
2. The Lord Himself practices it – Heb 12:6
3. The church loses credibility and effective witness without it – Rev 2-3, 1 Pet 2:11-12
4. Jesus explains how to exercise it – Matt 18:15-20

Sins that lead to Church Discipline

It is true that the New Testament does not explicitly list the sin where church discipline is needed. And the fact remains that all sin is, frankly, sin! Keeping in mind that the purpose of church discipline is redemptive (restorative) in nature, then it does not matter what the sin is – all sin negatively affects the local church. However, a helpful principle to practice is, the more public the sin, the more public the action of discipline should be.

Thankfully the New Testament is not silent on this issue because certain sins are more destructive to the life of the church than others. Generally speaking the list of sin requiring discipline is as follows:

1. Sin that destroys Christian unity and relationship – Matt 5:23-24, Rom 16:17, Titus 3:9-11
2. Sin that involves corrupt or immoral behavior – Gal 6:1, esp. 1 Cor 5
3. Sin that involves rebellion or rejection of God’s Word – 2 Thes 3:6, 1 Tim 1:19-20
4. Sin that harms the testimony of the church – 2 Thes 3:11-14, 1 Cor 5:1 (when a believer acts more sinfully brazen than someone outside the church, action must be taken)

It is instructive to remember the warning Jesus gave to the church in Ephesus, “repent or I will remove your lampstand” (Rev 2:5). In other words, when unrepentant sin is not confronted, rebuked and removed from the fellowship of the local church, that church runs the risk of losing its credibility, testimony, and Spirit-empowered ministry in the community.

The Steps of Church Discipline

1. **Self-examination** (Matt 7:3-5; Ps 139:23-24) The first step is to daily allow the Lord to examine our hearts and motives in order that we might repent and receive forgiveness. This step is the natural out growth of a consistent and sincere relationship with Jesus Christ. Also, it is important to recognize that in a healthy church private corrective discipline is happening all the time because growing Christians welcome other Christians into their lives for the purpose of confessing sin and mutual accountability (James 5:16). When this step is consistently applied the need for the following steps is likely not necessary.
2. **The Private Conversation** (one-on one) (Gal 6:1; Matt 18:15) In the attitude of love and humility with gentleness the believer is to confront (approach) the wayward Christian and encourage them to repent. Matthew 18:15 stresses an offense against another believer, while Galatians 6:1 states “anyone” caught in sin!
3. **Private Support** (Matt 18:16) If the wayward believer will not repent then one should take 1 or 2 other believers to confront and encourage the wayward believer to repent. If he or she is unwilling to have such a meeting then a warning about further action should be made for the purpose of winning them back to the path of obedience.
4. **Public Confrontation** (Matt 18:17) The purpose of public exposure to the body of Christ is to allow the church family to become aware that the brother/sister is refusing the counsel of godly leaders while refusing to repent (or reconcile). The church is invited and encouraged to contact the wayward believer in order to encourage such one to accept the counsel of the leaders. The key in this step is the refusal to repent.
5. **Public Condemnation** (Matt 18:17) The sinner is excluded from the church (removed from the church rolls and excluded from participating in the Lord’s Supper) until he or she repents and shows the fruit appropriate for repentance. The following is included in this step:
 - a) Treat them as an unbeliever based upon that person’s unrepentant attitude and behavior. This does not mean they are not welcome to attend church.
 - b) Withhold social fellowship (2 Thess 3:6; Rom 16:17) Member are encouraged to avoid eating meals, “hanging out” or casually chatting with the wayward believer as if they have done nothing wrong (1 Cor 5:9-13).
 - c) When contact is made, make loving appeals in order to persuade such one to repent and reconcile with the body.
 - d) When in their presence reveal true love and care.