

Berean Fellowship's Statement on Church Discipline

Throughout its pages, the Bible sounds a recurring theme: those God loves, he disciplines.¹ Discipline is a sometimes challenging process of God correcting his people's thoughts, words and behavior so they can fulfill their calling to become like Him. God disciplines His people through a variety of means. He calls His people first to self-discipline. Each Christian is called to hear the Word of God as he reads the Bible and hears the Bible taught and applied.² As he compares his life to God's Word, he adjusts himself to conform to his Savior. But individual interaction with God through His Word is not the only means that God uses to make his children holy. God also uses His people. "Brothers," writes Paul, "if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness...."³ As members of this local church, we take seriously our responsibility to "restore" members who fail to allow God to discipline them personally for their sins. This means that beginning with private confrontation and, if necessary, leading to public rebuke, we seek to help one another overcome any refusal to repent of those words and actions that the Bible clearly defines as sin⁴. This includes not only sinful words and behavior, but also refusal to turn from heretical doctrine.

Jesus outlined a process for addressing another believer's sin in Matthew 18:15-17.⁵ As a church, we agree that this is the way for us to approach someone who refuses to appropriate God's grace for change. Initially, church discipline should be informal: if a Christian sees sin in a brother or sister that appears to be continual, he should approach that person and inquire about it. If in fact there is unrepentant sin and a refusal to repent, then the concerned brother or sister should involve one or two others, which may include an elder. If this group confirms that, in fact, sin continues without repentance, the process must move to formal church discipline.

When the church begins to formally discipline a member, the church's elders inquire with the individual member in question to confirm fact and to appeal for change. If change is not forthcoming, the elders will inform the church of the member and his sin, urging members to contact the erring member and appeal for repentance. During this time, the member under discipline may not attend Sunday gathering or Growth Group meetings. Instead, his participation with members should revolve around his need for change. If, after a reasonable period of appeal, no repentance is forthcoming, the elders will inform the church again, this time announcing that they must revoke membership and that the church must now treat the unrepentant person as they treat unbelievers: in other words, when they interact with this person they should not have "fellowship" as the Bible defines it, but they should appeal for the former member to put his faith in Jesus' work on the cross for him and turn from his sin.

Church discipline has nothing to do with "shunning" a person. It involves first confronting in love and gentleness and, if unsuccessful, withholding fellowship. It is not rejection of a relationship but a change in the nature of a relationship. The elders may decide to abbreviate or eliminate the process of appeal for repentance if the sin is especially notorious, or if the member proves to be factious, disruptive, or leading others into sin or error. In these cases, the elders may ask church members to avoid all contact with an individual in order to mitigate his sinful influence.

¹ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives" (Hebrews 12:5-6 ESV, see also verses 7-13).

² See John 15:3, 10, 20; John 17:17; 2 Thessalonians 3:14; 2 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 4:11-13.

³ Galatians 6:1 ESV

⁴ Other New Testament passages (besides Galatians 6:1 and Matthew 18:15-17) that support this practice include: 1 Corinthians 5; Acts: 20:28ff; Galatians 2:11-14; 1 Timothy 5:20; Titus 3:10-11; Romans 16:17; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11.

⁵ If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector (ESV).

At times a member may seek to withdraw from the church to avoid church discipline and its consequences. Just as a good shepherd will go after a sheep that has wandered from the flock (Matthew 18:12-14; Ezekiel 34:4,8,16), so shall the elders and members of this church seek to restore a wandering member to the Lord through biblical discipline. Therefore, discipline may be instituted or continued either before or after a member seeks to withdraw from membership if the leaders determine that such discipline may serve to guard and preserve the honor of God, protect the purity of the church, or restore the wandering member to the Lord. While the church cannot force a withdrawing member to remain in this congregation, the church has the right and the responsibility to encourage restoration, to bring the disciplinary process to an orderly conclusion, and to make a final determination as to the person's membership status at the time withdrawal is sought or acknowledged.

In doing so, the elders, at their discretion, may temporarily suspend further disciplinary proceedings, dismiss any or all charges pending against the accused, or proceed with discipline and pronounce an appropriate censure.

If a member leaves the church while he is under the scrutiny of the disciplinary process or while a censure against him is still in effect, and if the leadership learns that he is attending another church, they may inform that church that the person is currently under church discipline and may ask that church to encourage the accused to repent of his sin and to be restored to the Lord and to any people whom he has offended. Such communications enhance the possibility that a person may finally repent of his sin, and, at the same time, serve to warn the other church to be on guard against the harm that the accused might do to its members (see Matthew 18:12-14; Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-14; 2 Timothy 1:15; 2:16-18; 4:9, 14-15; 3 John 9-10).

Once the elders make a sin publicly known, they commit as well to inform the church of repentance and restoration to fellowship as appropriate to the situation and the good of the church.

Christians who attend our church and have been excluded from fellowship from another church will not be allowed to participate in fellowship here unless they repent of their sins and make confession and restitution with their former church or the elders of this church are able to determine that the former church did not apply church discipline according to Scripture.