

COMMITMENT TO ACCOUNTABILITY AND CHURCH DISCIPLINE

*And let us consider how to stimulate one another
to love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24).*

A. Accountability and Discipline Are Signs of God's Love

God has established the church to reflect His character, wisdom, and glory in the midst of a fallen world (Eph. 3:10-11). He loves His church so much that He sent His Son to die for her as Christ's bride, and is continually working to purify the church and bring her to maturity (Eph. 5:25-27, Rev. 19:7).

This does not mean that God expects the church to be made up of perfectly pure people. He knows that the best of churches are still companies of sinners who wrestle daily with remaining sin (1 John 1:8; Phil. 3:12). So it helps us to confess our common struggle with sin and our mutual need for God's mercy and grace. We also can spur one another toward maturity by encouraging and holding each other accountable to love, seek after, and obey God with all of our hearts, souls, minds and strength, and to love others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:30-31; Heb. 10:24-25).

The Bible sometimes refers to this process of mutual encouragement and accountability as "discipline." The Bible never presents church discipline as being negative, legalistic, or harsh as modern society often does. True discipline originates from God Himself and is always presented as a sign of genuine love. "The Lord disciplines those He loves" (Heb. 12:6). "Blessed is the man You discipline, O LORD, the man You teach from Your law" (Ps. 94:12). "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline" (Rev. 3:19).

God's discipline in the church, like the discipline in a God-honoring family, is intended to be primarily positive, instructive, and encouraging. This process, sometimes called "formative discipline," involves preaching, teaching, prayer, personal Bible study, small group fellowship, and countless other enjoyable activities that challenge and encourage us to love and serve God more wholeheartedly.

God's discipline, as in a family with growing children, may also have a corrective purpose. When we forget or disobey what God has taught us, He corrects us. One way He does this is to call the church to seek after us and lead us back to the path of godliness. This process, which is sometimes called "corrective" or "restorative" discipline, is likened in Scripture to a shepherd seeking after a lost sheep.

If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray" (Matt. 18:12-13).

Thus, restorative or corrective discipline is always to be administered in humility and love, with the goal of restoring someone to a close walk with Christ (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1), protecting others from harm (1 Cor. 5:6), and showing respect for the honor and glory of God (1 Pet. 2:12).

Biblical discipline is similar to the discipline we value in other aspects of life. We admire parents who consistently teach their children how to behave properly and who lovingly discipline them when they disobey. We value music teachers who attempt to bring out the best in their students by teaching them proper technique and consistently pointing out their errors so that they can play a piece properly. We applaud athletic coaches who diligently teach their players to do what is right and correct them when they err so that the team works well together and can compete for the championship.

The same principles apply to the family of God. We, too, need to be taught what is right and to be lovingly corrected when we do something contrary to what God teaches us in His Word. Therefore, we as a church are committed to helping one another obey God's command to be "sensible, just, devout, self-controlled" (Titus 1:8).

B. Most Corrective Discipline Is Private, Personal, and Informal

God gives every believer grace to be self-disciplined. "For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline." (2 Tim. 1:7). Thus discipline always begins as a personal matter and usually remains that way, as each of us studies God's Word, seeks Him in prayer, and draws on His grace to change and grow in godliness.

But sometimes we are blind to our sins or so tangled in them that we cannot get free on our own. "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called 'Today,' so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:12-13). This is why the Bible says, "Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness" (Gal. 6:1). In obedience to this command, we are committed to giving and receiving loving correction within Calvary Memorial Church whenever a sin (whether in word, behavior, or doctrine) seems too serious to overlook (Prov. 19:11).

If repeated private conversations do not lead another person to repentance, Jesus commands that we ask other brothers or sisters to get involved. "But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you" (Matt. 18:16). If informal conversations with these people fail to resolve the matter, then we may seek the involvement of more influential people, such as a small group leader, Sunday school teacher, or church leader. If even these efforts fail to bring a brother or sister to repentance, and if the issue is too serious to overlook, we will move into what may be called "formal discipline."

C. Formal Discipline May Involve the Entire Church

If an individual persistently refuses to listen to personal and informal correction to turn from speech or behavior that the Bible defines as sin, Jesus commands us to "tell it to the church" (Matt. 18:17a). This first involves informing one or more church leaders about the situation. If the offense is not likely to cause imminent harm to others, our leaders may approach the individual privately to personally establish the facts and encourage repentance of any sin they discover. The individual will be given every reasonable opportunity to explain and defend his or her actions. If the individual recognizes his or her sin and repents, the matter usually ends there unless a confession to additional people is needed.

If the straying individual does not repent in response to private appeals from leaders, they may inform others in the church who may be able to influence that individual or be willing to pray for him or her, or people who might be harmed or affected by that person's behavior. This step may include close friends, a small group, a Sunday school class, or the entire congregation if leaders deem it to be appropriate (Matt. 18:17; 1 Tim. 5:20).

As the disciplinary process progresses, leaders may impose a variety of sanctions to encourage repentance, including but not limited to private and public admonition, withholding the Lord's Supper, removing from office, and withdrawing of normal fellowship (Matt. 5:23-24; 2 Thess. 3:6-15).

If, after a reasonable period of time, the individual still refuses to change, and upon careful and prayerful consideration by the elders, the church will be informed. Each church member's responsibility then, will be to personally seek the individual's repentance and restoration. If the individual refuses to heed the warning of the church, he or she will be publicly dismissed from the church and treated like an unbeliever. This means that we will no longer treat him or her as a fellow Christian. Instead of having casual, relaxed fellowship with the individual, we will look for opportunities to lovingly bring the Gospel to them, remind them of God's holiness and mercy, and call them to repent and put their faith in Christ (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20).

If an offense is likely to harm others or lead them into sin, or cause division or disruption, our leaders may accelerate the entire disciplinary process and move promptly to protect the church (Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; Titus 3:10-11).

We realize that our natural human response to correction is often to hide or run away from accountability (Gen. 3:8-10). To avoid falling into this age-old trap and to strengthen Calvary Memorial Church's ability to rescue us if we are caught in sin, we agree not to run away from this church to avoid corrective discipline. Therefore, we waive our right to withdraw from membership or accountability if discipline is in process. Although we are free to stop attending the church at any time, we agree that a withdrawal while discipline is pending will not be made effective until the church has fulfilled its God-given responsibilities to encourage our repentance and restoration, and to bring the disciplinary process to an orderly conclusion, as described in these Commitments (Matt. 18:12-14; Gal. 6:1; Heb. 13:17).

If an individual leaves the church while discipline is in effect or is being considered, and leaders learn that he or she is attending another church, they may inform that church of the situation and ask its leaders to encourage the individual to repent and be reconciled to the Lord and to any people he or she has offended. This action is intended both to help the individual find freedom from their sin and to warn the other church about the harm that he or she might do to their members (see Matt. 18:12-14; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 3 John 1:9-10).

Loving restoration always stands at the heart of the disciplinary process. If an individual repents, and leaders confirm his or her sincerity, we will rejoice together and gladly imitate God's forgiveness by restoring the person to fellowship within the body (see Matt. 18:13; Luke 15:3-7, 11-32; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; Col. 3:12-14). Genuine repentance would include:

1. Being voluntarily transparent in disclosing the full extent of the sin.
2. Not downplaying sin (minimizing, blame-shifting, excusing).
3. Not despairing over sin with a self-centered, worldly sorrow (2 Corinthians 7:10) having more concern about the pain and consequences sin causes to oneself rather than the offense and dishonor it is to God.
4. Accepting the consequences of sin with a contented trust that God will take care of the outcome, rather than trying to manage the outcome (Luke 23:40-41).
5. Asking for forgiveness, pursuing reconciliation, and making amends with all those who have been hurt or affected by the sin (Luke 19:1-10).
6. Proactively taking steps to change, including being teachable and submitting willingly to the counsel and direction of church leadership.

Where known, people who have been excluded from another church because of church discipline issues will not be allowed to partake of the ordinances, become members, or participate in the regular fellowship of Calvary Memorial Church, until they have repented of their sins and made a reasonable effort to be reconciled, **or** until such time as our leaders have determined that the discipline of the former church was not biblically appropriate.

D. Additional Instructions Pertaining to an Elder

Scripture provides additional instructions concerning a sinning elder. 1 Timothy 5:20 says, "*Those [elders] who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear*" (NKJV). Whether "*sinning*" means (1) *any* disqualifying sin, or (2) "*continuing in sin*" (NASB) or "*persisting in sin*" (ESV), we feel it is wise to give an explanation to the congregation for the elder's disqualification whether he repents or not (Matthew 18 will be followed if there is no repentance).

We believe that an explanation is wise and necessary for several reasons:

- Elders hold the highest position of trust in the church. Hebrews 13:7 calls church members to follow the example set by their leaders in both faith and conduct. While the church grieves when any member is caught in sin, it is even harder for a church to deal with the fall of one of its leaders whom they have looked to as an example. That is a violation of corporate trust and not merely a personal matter for the elder to deal with.
- Elders are ordained publicly based on their character as affirmed by the congregation. If a man is affirmed publicly, it is appropriate that his removal from office be just as public, and that those who affirmed his character are informed about the reason he is no longer qualified. If an elder steps down for personal reasons, not because of disqualification, an explanation will still be given to the congregation to avoid confusion and wrong assumptions.
- Elders have intimate knowledge of the church's practices regarding church discipline and the operation of the elder board that puts them in an advantageous position. This means an elder could leverage that knowledge to control the outcome of what is done or not done regarding his sin. By requiring the reasons for disqualification to be made public, the church is further protected from the kind of "leader partiality" 1 Timothy 5:21 warns against.
- Elders are held to a higher standard in Scripture. Because the level of the authority entrusted to an elder by God is serious, his removal from office is also serious, and should be dealt with openly and forthrightly. Again, there is biblical precedence for this in 1 Timothy 5:20 where a sinning elder is to be rebuked in the presence of all. It is clear that this passage is holding elders to a higher standard, and that standard involves public exposure of their sin.

We believe that a man may be restored to the office of elder. However, a disqualifying offense may be compounded by its multi-layer betrayal of (1) God, (2) wife and family, (3) the witness of the Gospel in his life, (4) the trust of the people within the church and (5) the reputation of the Gospel outside of the church. Therefore, the process of restoring a man to the office of elder would likely be lengthy and involve the following:

1. Genuine repentance. If there is genuine repentance (see section C above), forgiveness would be granted and received immediately based on the blood of Christ.
2. Trustworthiness. There is a difference between being forgiven and being trustworthy. Depending on the sin, it may take a while (possibly years) for the man to prove himself trustworthy. He should be in no hurry to expect or demand restoration to the office of elder. Instead, his life should first demonstrate evidence of humility, transparency, accountability, and faithfulness to God, family, and church.

3. Qualification. Having demonstrated trustworthiness, he would also need to meet the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9 including being affirmed by the elders and congregation in accordance with the usual elder and deacon nomination process.

E. Additional Instructions Pertaining to a Sex Offender

As mentioned above, CMC is devoted to the restoration of believers who evidence the fruit of genuine repentance in their lives (Matthew 18:15-20 and 2 Corinthians 2:5-11). At the same time, one of a shepherd's greatest responsibilities is the safeguard and protection of the flock from harm, including protection from potential threats whether spiritual, physical, emotional, legal, or financial in nature. Therefore, we have created a policy that allows a sex offender to attend worship at CMC while providing for the safety and wellbeing of the congregation. This policy is available upon request.