



Church Discipline

I. What Is Church Discipline?

- Church discipline has as its most basic goal local church members holding one another accountable to live as disciples of Jesus.
- Functionally, a person undergoes church discipline when he or she exhibits a continual, unrepentant pattern of sin that becomes known to the local church.
- The purpose of church discipline is to remove patterns of known sin from among the local congregation.
- The process of church discipline begins with a private call to repentance, but it can escalate to removing someone from church fellowship (meaning membership and attendance).
- The desired result of church discipline is always repentance and restoration.

II. Where Does the Idea Come From?

- The cornerstone passage for church discipline is [Matthew 18:15-18](#), where Jesus describes a four-step process building up to and including discipline:
 - Step 1 – the offended party (or the one who discovers the sin pattern) privately addresses the situation with the offender. *This is not yet church discipline.*
 - Step 2 – if the offender refuses to repent, the offended party gets a few church leaders to address the issue again. *This is where discipline technically begins.*
 - Step 3 – if the offender again refuses to repent, the matter is brought before the church.
 - Step 4 – if the offender remains defiant, he or she is to be removed from the community.

WEDNESDAY

HEALTHY CHURCH

ADULT BIBLE STUDY

- Note that 18:18 is part of this saying. Jesus puts heavenly authority behind the decision of the church to remove a member given the proper process has taken place.
 - The offender does not have the right to defy the church's decision by denying that the community has authority to remove him/her.
- Matthew 18 is not the only passage to address discipline. The other New Testament writers address it regularly:
Note: most of this list comes from chapter 5 of Mark Dever's Nine Marks of a Healthy Church.
 - 1 Cor 5:1-11 – Paul calls the Corinthian church to remove a man who is sleeping with his stepmother
 - Galatians 6:1 – Paul calls the church to restore a sinful brother gently
 - 2 Thess 3:6-15 – Paul calls the Thessalonian church to stop meeting with brothers who are lazy and will not work
 - 1 Tim 1:20 – Paul has already put two church members out for blaspheming.
 - 2 Peter 2 – Peter gives a list of people in the church whose behavior shows they “will be destroyed” (see Jude for a similar list)

III. Background for Church Discipline

- While church discipline is a distinctly New Testament concept, it is really a continuation of a long-standing biblical pattern:
 - Genesis 3 – God exiles Adam and Eve from the garden for their rebellion
 - Exodus 32:25-29 – Moses commands the deaths of those who led Israel into idolatry
 - Numbers 15:30 – Defiant sin results in being cut off from the Israelite community (see also Ex 12:15; Lev. 17:10-16)
 - Deuteronomy 29:14-21 – A person who defiantly proclaims that he can live in open sin and still get the blessing of God's land will be cursed and “blotted out”
- Church discipline continues that pattern of God working to make a holy people for himself and removing those from his community who refuse to walk with him in that project.

WEDNESDAY

HEALTHY CHURCH

ADULT BIBLE STUDY

IV. The Context for Discipline

- Church discipline only occurs within the scope of church membership. A church cannot discipline someone who is not a member.
 - Only members have covenanted together to be a congregation under mutual accountability.
 - The fear of discipline should not keep anyone from joining a church as a member. We all benefit from community accountability.
- Church discipline only occurs when a pattern of continual, *unrepentant* sin is discovered.
- The discipleship efforts of a local church and the shepherding efforts of its elders should be the most effective means of preventing the need for discipline. They are not foolproof means, though.

V. Biblical Purposes for Discipline

- The most immediate and tangible purpose for church discipline is the repentance and restoration of a sinful brother or sister.
- Discipline also serves as a warning against to the rest of the community (see 1 Cor 5:6).
- Discipline serves to help the church be what God means for it to be, a community of his people reflecting his glory and holiness to the world.