

Church Discipline

Grace Church Elders Position

Winter 2023-24

Christian church discipline refers to the practice within a Christian congregation or community of correcting, rebuking, or addressing members who engage in behavior that is deemed contrary to the Biblical teachings and standards of the Christian faith. The primary goals of church discipline are restoration, maintaining the purity and unity of the church, and preserving its witness to the world.

This discipline process is guided by Biblical principles and may involve a series of steps, outlined in passages such as Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5:1-13. The foundation for Christian church discipline is grounded in the belief that accountability, correction, and restoration are essential aspects of the Christian life. It is not intended as punitive action but to reflect the love, grace, and redemptive nature of God, but it can include protecting the church from disruption and harm. The process is carried out with the hope of bringing the disciplined individual to repentance, promoting spiritual growth, and maintaining the overall health and holiness of the Christian community. The process is not intended to take place in a specified length of time and could be deliberate and slow, leaving ample time for prayerful reflection.

Biblical Basis:

Several biblical passages provide the foundation for Christian church discipline, offering guidance on the principles, purpose, and process of addressing issues within the community of believers. Here are some key Biblical foundations:

Matthew 18:15-20:

Jesus provides a framework for addressing personal offenses within the church. The process involves private confrontation, bringing witnesses, and ultimately involving the church leadership if the issue persists. Emphasis is placed on the goal of reconciliation and restoration.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13:

Paul specifically addresses the issue of sexual immorality taking place within the Corinthian church. He instructs the church to remove the unrepentant sinner from their midst. Here we see highlighted the concept of maintaining purity within the body of believers.

Galatians 6:1:

In this context Paul puts the emphasis of church discipline on humility and the responsibility of the spiritual community to support and restore by encouraging a spirit of gentleness when restoring a brother caught in sin.

Titus 3:10-11:

In this passage Paul advises Titus on dealing with divisive people in the church by instructing him to warn the divisive person twice, and then, if still unrepentant, have nothing more to do with them.

2 Thessalonians 3:14-15:

To the church at Thessalonica Paul instructs them to take note of those who do not obey his instructions, encouraging the church not to associate with them, with the goal of bringing them to repentance.

1 Timothy 5:19-20:

To Timothy Paul addresses the process of dealing with accusations against elders by advising him not to entertain accusations without evidence but, if proven true, to rebuke the elder publicly to serve as a warning to others.

Hebrews 12:5-11:

The Hebrew author writes to dispersed Jewish Christians regarding the discipline of the Lord and how earthly fathers discipline their children. The emphasis is placed on the corrective nature of discipline for the purpose of producing righteousness.

These passages collectively form the Biblical basis for Christian church discipline. The action can include disassociation with the offending parties, even expulsion. However, the overall image portrayed in Scripture is correction that is intended to bring restoration, while at the same time maintaining the purity and unity of the body of believers. The overarching theme is one of love, accountability, and the desire for the spiritual growth and well-being of individuals within the Christian community.

Ultimate Purpose:

With the ultimate purpose of Christian church discipline rooted in the principles of love, restoration, and the pursuit of holiness within the body of believers, the overarching goals can be summarized as follows:

Restoration of the Individual:

Church discipline aims to bring about repentance and restoration for individuals who have strayed from the teachings and standards of the Christian faith. The process is designed to help the disciplined person recognize their wrongdoing, turn away from sin, and return to a right relationship with God and the church community.

Purity and Holiness of the Church:

Church discipline is intended to maintain the purity and holiness of the church as a collective body of believers. By addressing sin and unrepentant behavior, the church seeks to uphold its commitment to living in accordance with Biblical principles and presenting a faithful representation of Christ to the world.

Protection of the Church Community:

Church discipline serves as a means of protecting the broader church community from the detrimental effects of sin and disobedience. It helps guard against the spread of false teachings, divisive behaviors, and other actions that could harm the unity and spiritual well-being of the community.

Witness to the World:

The discipline process is a testimony to the transformative power of the Gospel. By handling internal matters with love, accountability, and a commitment to restoration, the church demonstrates to the world the redemptive nature of Christianity and the genuine concern for the spiritual health of its members.

Fulfillment of Biblical Commands:

Church discipline is a response to specific Biblical commands and principles outlined in the Scriptures. Following Biblical guidelines ensures that the church operates in accordance with God's revelation to us and obedience to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

Discipleship and Spiritual Growth:

The process of church discipline is not solely punitive; it is also an expression of discipleship. Through correction and guidance, individuals can experience spiritual growth, deepening their understanding of God's Word and maturing in their faith.

Process of Church Discipline:

The process of Christian church discipline has as its goal addressing sin and fostering repentance and restoration within the community of believers. While the specific steps may vary, the following is a general framework to be followed:

Private Confrontation:

Scriptural Basis: Matthew 18:15

Process: When a member of the church becomes aware of another member's sin or offense, the first step is to address the individual privately. The goal is to reconcile and restore the relationship.

Involvement of Witnesses:

Scriptural Basis: Matthew 18:16

Process: If the private confrontation does not lead to resolution, the next step involves bringing one or two witnesses. This step serves to confirm the facts of the situation and emphasizes the seriousness of the matter.

Church Leadership Involvement:

Scriptural Basis: Matthew 18:17a

Process: If the issue persists, it is brought to the attention of the church leadership, such as elders, pastors or ministry leaders. They may meet with the parties involved, offer counsel, and seek a resolution.

Should a church discipline matter not reach a resolution after this intervening step, those leaders involved would likely ask the offending party to step away from either leadership or participation in some or all aspects of church life.

Church Congregation Involvement:

Scriptural Basis: Matthew 18:17b

Process: If resolution has still not been achieved after church leaders have intervened, the matter may be brought before the entire congregation. This step emphasizes the corporate responsibility of the church community and seeks the input and support of the broader body.

The kind of situations that would merit this level of action would likely be in cases where the person's infraction was public and/or having an overall disruptive effect on the church family. In such cases the church family being publicly informed would be intended to give assurance that the elders are addressing the issue and discipline is being maintained.

Excommunication (Last Resort):

Scriptural Basis: 1 Corinthians 5:5, 13

Process: In cases of persistent, unrepentant sin, and after following the Biblical outlined steps of confrontation and involvement of the church community, excommunication may be a necessary action. This would involve formal removal of the disruptive person from the fellowship of the church. The purpose is both disciplinary and redemptive, with the hope that the severity of the action leads to repentance and restoration.

This action might be taken in a situation in which the offending party will not consider repentance and only response is to continue creating disruption within the fellowship of the church family.

Throughout the entire process, it is the elders' intent that an emphasis on love, grace, and a genuine desire for restoration be exhibited at all times.

Guided by Compassion and Restoration:

Compassion and restoration are integral aspects of the Christian church discipline process. While discipline involves addressing sin, the ultimate goal is to bring about repentance, reconciliation, and the restoration of the individual to a right relationship with God and the church community. Here's the Bible's instruction as to how compassion and restoration are woven into the discipline process:

Motivated by Love:

Biblical Basis: Galatians 6:1; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Process: Church members, leaders, and the congregation approach the disciplined individual with a genuine desire for their well-being, with the intent that love motivates every step, emphasizing that discipline is an expression of care rather than condemnation.

Gentle Correction:

Biblical Basis: Galatians 6:1

Process: The process begins with private confrontation, and throughout each stage, there is an emphasis on gentleness. Correction is intended to be administered with a spirit of humility and grace, avoiding a harsh or judgmental attitude.

Supportive Community:

Biblical Basis: Galatians 6:2

Process: The church community plays a crucial role in supporting the disciplined individual. The involvement of witnesses and, later, the entire congregation, is not only intended to address the issue but also to surround the individual with a supportive community that encourages repentance and restoration.

Ongoing Discipleship:

Biblical Basis: Matthew 28:19-20

Process: The discipline process is not merely a one-time event; it involves ongoing discipleship. It is intended that church leaders and members are committed to walking alongside the disciplined individual, providing spiritual guidance, mentorship, and encouragement as they strive for spiritual growth.

Focus on Restoration:

Biblical Basis: Galatians 6:1; James 5:19-20

Process: The primary objective is the restoration of the individual. Each step in the discipline process is intended to lead the disciplined person to repentance, reconciliation with God, and reintegration into the fellowship of the church.

Redemptive Approach to Excommunication:

Biblical Basis: 1 Corinthians 5:5; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15

Process: Even in the extreme case of excommunication, the purpose remains redemptive. The intention is that the severity of being removed from the fellowship will lead to a realization of the seriousness of the sin, prompting repentance and a desire for restoration.

Modeling God's Grace:

Biblical Basis: Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 2:11-12

Process: Throughout the discipline process, the church intends to model the grace of God. Just as God extends grace to the repentant sinner, the church intends to demonstrate a gracious and forgiving spirit, emphasizing the possibility of restoration through God's abundant grace.

Compassion and restoration are woven into the fabric of Christian church discipline. The process is characterized by love, gentleness, ongoing support, and a redemptive focus, reflecting the transformative power of God's grace and the desire for the spiritual well-being of each individual within the body of believers.

Ongoing Discipleship:

Ongoing discipleship is a crucial component of the Christian church discipline process, ensuring that individuals who have gone through the discipline process experience continued support, spiritual growth, and integration back into the church community. Here's a description of the ongoing discipleship needed to complete Christian church discipline:

Spiritual Guidance and Mentorship:

Role: Church leaders and mature members of the congregation.

Purpose: To provide ongoing spiritual guidance and mentorship to the disciplined individual. This involves regular meetings, discussions about spiritual matters, and practical assistance in navigating the challenges of Christian living.

Bible Study and Theological Education:

Role: Church leaders, mentors, or small group leaders.

Purpose: To encourage the disciplined individual to deepen their understanding of the Bible and theology that might help in fortifying their faith and equipping them to make informed, godly decisions.

Prayer Support:

Role: Church community.

Purpose: To establish a consistent prayer support network for the disciplined individual. Regular prayer meetings, prayer partners, and intercessory prayer can play a vital role in fostering a strong connection with God and the church community.

Integration into Small Groups or Ministries:

Role: Church leaders and members.

Purpose: To facilitate the disciplined individual's reintegration into the church community by involving them in small groups or ministry activities to help in building relationships, fostering accountability, and providing a sense of belonging.

Personal Accountability:

Role: Mentors, accountability partners.

Purpose: To establish a system of personal accountability to ensure ongoing growth and prevent a return to previous patterns of behavior. Regular check-ins and honest conversations can contribute to accountability.

Counseling and Emotional Support:

Role: Pastoral counselors, professional counselors if needed.

Purpose: To address any emotional or psychological challenges the disciplined individual may face. Counseling can provide a safe space to discuss struggles, receive guidance, and work through issues that may hinder spiritual growth.

Encouragement in Serving Others:

Role: Church leaders, mentors.

Purpose: To encourage the disciplined individual to actively participate in serving others. Engaging in acts of service could help shift the focus from personal struggles to the needs of others, fostering a sense of purpose and contributing to spiritual maturity.

Regular Check-Ins:

Role: Church leaders, mentors, small group members.

Purpose: To maintain regular communication to assess the individual's spiritual well-being, address any concerns or challenges, and celebrate milestones in their spiritual journey.

Community Involvement:

Role: Church community.

Purpose: To foster a sense of community by involving the disciplined individual in social events, gatherings, and church activities. Community involvement can help them feel connected and supported.

Continued Repentance and Growth:

Role: Disciplined individual, mentors.

Purpose: To encourage a lifestyle of repentance and ongoing spiritual growth. This involves recognizing the need for continuous transformation and maintaining a humble and teachable spirit.