



CHRIST'S CHURCH OF JOPLIN

GUIDELINES FOR CHURCH DISCIPLINE

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Introduction: Discipline in Light of the Gospel

In the beginning, man and woman were created by God for His glory and our joy. By design, our greatest delight and satisfaction were to be found in trusting and obeying God. Although man and woman were created “good,” they rebelled against their creator. This rebellion had far-reaching consequences for their relationships with God, each other, and God’s created world. When humans became sinners, we became slaves to sin and enemies of God.

However, God’s plan to unite his glory and our joy was not thwarted. God began working to restore what was broken, and his plan was fully revealed in the person and work of his Son, Jesus Christ. Through him, we have been redeemed from slavery to sin and reconciled to God.

But that is not the end of the story. We are looking forward to Christ’s return, which will bring about the restoration of all God’s creation. Until then, we work out our salvation as we submit ourselves to God and leave behind old ways of thinking and behaving. We are learning to imitate God instead as his dearly beloved children.

We don’t want to be like the first humans, deceived by wrong ideas about God or passive while others are being led into sin. Members of the local church are called by God to watch out for ourselves and for those we love. When we talk about church discipline, we’re talking about corporate and individual practices that help us do these things well.

Understanding Discipline

In Colossians 1:28-29, we see that discipleship is the process of reaching maturity in Christ and that it involves discipline. The writer of Hebrews teaches us that God’s children are disciplined by him in one form or another, and this proves that they belong to him (Hebrews 12:5-11). Sometimes God sends tribulation and persecution or removes worldly comforts to foster humility, holiness, and faith in us. Sometimes he disciplines through the work of the community of faith.

Love for the Lord and fellow Christians demands that we put the desires of our flesh to death and deal with sin according to God’s word. Therefore, love demands discipline. This document is concerned with corporate discipline in the context of the local church body. The term “church discipline” will include the various steps of coming alongside a professing believer to exhort, encourage, warn, and rebuke in hope for that person’s restoration and maturity.

An Individual Calling

Believers are commanded to be intentional, disciplined, and self-controlled as we seek and submit to the Lord (Galatians 5:22-23, 2 Timothy 1:7). However, our flesh is opposed to our desire for holiness, and we must be diligent to walk by the Spirit as children of God (Galatians 5:16-17, Romans 8:12-14). Through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, we can each grow in our ability to obey God (1 Peter 1:2).

A Corporate Calling

We are often blind to our own sinfulness (Matthew 7:3-5). Therefore, all of us need the most basic level of church discipline, which involves our brothers and sisters speaking the truth in love to us (Ephesians 4:15, 29). We’re also called to labor and struggle with all energy to help the church grow in conformity to Christ (Colossians 1:28-29). We need one another to believe and live out the gospel — this is God’s design.

Spiritual Warfare

The difficulties we face in life are ultimately “not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). Our “adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” and seeks to keep us living in fear and not by faith (1 Peter 5:8). Therefore, we need to love one another through encouragement, rebuke, and correction.

The Context of Discipline

The situations addressed in this statement are those involving sin, rather than simply preferences. This distinction between dealing with issues of preference and those of sin can be seen in Romans 14:10-13 and 1 Corinthians 5:9-13. In Romans 14, Paul writes that we should not judge our brothers and sisters in one context, while in 1 Corinthians 5, he writes that we should judge our brothers and sisters in another.

Looking at each passage in context, we can see that the situations being addressed are different. Romans 14 is dealing with principles of preference (to the extent the individual believer is not using personal preferences as an excuse to sin), while 1 Corinthians 5 is dealing with that which has been clearly revealed as sin. This distinction must be maintained in the way individuals and churches interpret and apply Scripture today.

The Purpose of Discipline

Why should we engage in church discipline? Five reasons stand out to us: (1) we love a holy God and love for God demands the discipline of holiness, (2) we love our individual church members, (3) we love the church as a whole, (4) we love non-believers, and (5) we love the Scriptures.

1. We Love God

Though none of us will fully comprehend the Lord this side of glory, we recognize that our love for him is informed by our understanding of who he is, and the Scriptures tell us that God is holy (Habakkuk 1:13). Love for God demands the discipline of holiness. Part of loving God is rejecting that which is unholy, that which is opposed to him; namely, sin.

We will never truly love discipline until we hate sin. When Adam and Eve sinned, death, depravity, corruption, and disease entered the world. Because none of their children have fared any better, we are still experiencing these consequences. Sin is always devastating, and we see its effects constantly.

As believers, however, we have been set free from sin through the gift of God’s grace. This liberty does not grant us license to sin. Rather, those who have tasted God’s grace should all the more adamantly resist temptation.

2. We Love Our Members

The motivation behind church discipline should always be the restoration of the wayward brother or sister. Discipline is not the end but the means to the expected end of repentance and reconciliation in the life of the true believer (James 5:19-20). In loving our brethren, we must allow the Scriptures to define the means and manner of our love (1 John 5:2). Attempting to love in a way that neglects Scripture shows not only a lack of faith in the author of Scripture but an ignorance as to the meaning of genuine love. We must love in a way that is consistent with biblical revelation.¹

¹ The manner of love described in the Scriptures toward those involved in unrepentant sin will be expounded upon later in this document.

Love for our members demands that we engage in discipline for their good and not let them sit idly in their sin and pretend as if nothing is wrong. The Lord commanded us to practice church discipline as a means of sanctifying the church and her individual members. Failure on our part to carry out his desires is decidedly unloving.

3. We Love the Church

Not only are we called to love our individual members but also to love the whole assembly who gather together in the name of the Lord (1 Corinthians 5:1-13). Love for the Church, not just our local congregation, demands that we discipline ourselves for the sake of purity.

4. We Love Non-Believers

Those who profess belief in Christ and yet continue in unrepentant sin misrepresent the nature of grace. We want non-believers to know that the Christian faith does not gloss over hypocrisy or pretending. We take seriously the call of our Lord to no longer live as though sin is our master but to be ruled by grace instead (Romans 6:14).

5. We Love the Scriptures

As we will discuss in the following sections, the Lord has revealed the method through which the church is expected to deal with sin. Failing to obey God's commands *is* sin. We must be careful lest we ourselves fall into sin by allowing others to engage in it (Psalm 119:9-16, 2 Timothy 3:16). Love for the Scriptures demands that we discipline in accordance with their instructions.

The Responsibility of Discipline

Part of the membership process at Christ's Church includes signing our membership covenant. This covenant outlines the responsibilities of elders and members toward one another and the church body. Particularly relevant are the following responsibilities:

Elders' Responsibilities

- to care for the church and seek her growth in grace, truth, and love (Matthew 28:16-20, Ephesians 4:15-16, Colossians 1:28, James 5:14, 1 Peter 5:1-4).
- to lovingly exercise discipline when necessary for the glory of God, the good of the one disciplined, and the health of the church as a whole (Matthew 18:15-20, 1 Corinthians 5, Galatians 6:1, James 5:19-20).

Members' Responsibilities:

- to submit to the authority of the Scriptures as the final arbiter on all issues (Psalm 119, 2 Timothy 3:14-17, 2 Peter 1:19-21).
- to submit to the discipline of God by:
 - following the biblical procedures for church discipline where sin is evident in another, the hope of such discipline being repentance and restoration.
 - receiving righteous and loving discipline when approached biblically by fellow believers (Psalm 141:5, Matthew 18:15-20, 1 Corinthians 5:9-13, Hebrews 12:5-11).
 - submitting to the elders and other appropriate members of the church out of reverence for Christ and striving for unity and peace within the Church (Ephesians 4:1-3, Hebrews 13:17, 1 Peter 5:5).

Given that these responsibilities in the Scriptures are applicable to all believers, Christ's Church will reserve the right to exercise loving discipline outside of our official membership for those who regularly attend. The further a person is outside of the church, the less responsibility we will feel to engage them in the discipline process.

The Process of Discipline

Members of the church are expected to follow the biblical process of discipline as outlined in Appendix 1 of this document. Therefore, the first step in instances of sin should be a private meeting to express concerns and correct any misunderstandings. We cannot stress strongly enough the need for confidentiality. A general principle of the discipline process is the need to "keep the circle of people involved in a conflict as small as practicable for as long as possible"² subject to requirements of Scripture.

In the event that the sinning brother or sister is unrepentant, members are encouraged to ask a witness to accompany them for another meeting. If this also fails, the member is then asked to contact a leader at Christ's Church for further instructions on the church's response. Functionally, the third and fourth steps of the process outlined in Appendix 1 will be carried out in the presence of two or more recognized leaders, at least one of whom will be an elder.

While we never hope to arrive at these final steps, we fully believe that engaging in this process is the best way to love a wayward brother or sister. Therefore, we will unapologetically obey the Scriptures as they apply in such instances. While these actions may appear at odds with our ideas of love and compassion, we trust that God will ultimately show himself faithful and that he is a rewarder of those who seek him.

Appendix 1: The Steps & Dynamics of Church Discipline

Matthew 18:15-17	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Progressive, intensive steps of church discipline	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.
Level of Discipline	Informal Discipline	Informal Discipline	Formal Discipline	Formal Discipline
Who is involved?	Only the persons directly involved.	Persons directly involved plus 1-2 others who can be biblically discerning and objective.	Those already involved plus church leadership, a representative body of the church members, or the membership.	The offender's community must be informed of the general nature of the offense and ways they can minister to those directly involved.
When should this step of church discipline occur?	Step 1 should be occurring everyday in gospel-driven communities and relationships.	Step 2 occurs when a person (or persons) refuses to listen and repent after being biblically approached according to the directions of Step 1.	Step 3 occurs when a person (or persons) refuses to listen despite the call to faith and repentance from 2 or more people.	Step 4 occurs when a person (or persons) refuses to listen despite the call to faith and repentance from church leaders and involved community through a variety of approaches and repeated attempts.
Step Details	<p>Examine your own actions and motivations and confess and repent if necessary.</p> <p>Prayerfully consider how to approach the person.</p> <p>Deal one-on-one as soon possible after an offense is recognized.</p> <p>Speak truth in love, give grace for the moment.</p> <p>Be humble, gentle and patient .</p> <p>Depending on the nature of the offense, you might try a variety of approaches and repeated attempts before proceeding to the next step.</p> <p>Avoid gossip and slander.</p>	<p>Agree on 1-2 discerning and objective people who can understand the situation and help guide involved parties to live out the gospel by faith—perhaps a ministry leader or mutual friend.</p> <p>May be helpful to meet in a neutral location.</p> <p>Multiple meetings and a variety of approaches may be necessary to achieve incremental change.</p>	<p>Church leadership will investigate by meeting with those involved—listening and asking questions of the involved parties and those they brought into the situation.</p> <p>Community is crucial at this step—everyone involved needs to be kept updated so that sin can be exposed and the gospel can be ministered in a consistent and loving way.</p> <p>Multiple meetings and a variety of approaches may be necessary to achieve incremental change.</p>	<p>The unrepentant person is given a final warning, explaining the action taken with this last step of church discipline.</p> <p>The offender can no longer be affirmed as a believer in Christ.</p> <p>Excluded from communion.</p> <p>Excluded from groups such as homegroup, Bible studies and Recovery.</p> <p>Expelled from membership.</p> <p>May be asked to no longer attend weekly services, depending on the elders' discretion.</p> <p>Members are informed of offense and asked to not associate with the person as if nothing is wrong but to call the unrepentant person to faith and repentance in the gospel.</p> <p>Elders no longer have responsibility for the unrepentant soul— he is given over to the flesh, world and Satan.</p>

Appendix 2: Pertinent Scriptures

Matthew 18:15-17: "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. ¹⁶But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. ¹⁷ 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."

1 Corinthians 5:9-13: "I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; ¹⁰I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. ¹¹ But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler--not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? ¹³ But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves."

Galatians 6:1-2: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. ² Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us... ¹⁴ If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. ¹⁵ Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."

Luke 17:1-4: Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. ²It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. ³So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴ If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."

James 5:19-20: "My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins."