



Trinity Church

A Reformed & Evangelical Congregation

Policy on Church Discipline

Adopted: December 2, 2013

Purpose: In order to assist believers in distinguishing a true church from a false, our Reformational fathers insisted that biblically there are three marks of a true church: the faithful preaching of the Word of God, the right administration of the sacraments, and the faithful performance of church discipline. It is the third of these marks that this paper is intended to explain and provide guidelines for church members relating to those under discipline.

Rationale: Church Discipline is neither a popular nor an easy topic to address. As the church in Corinth illustrates, we sometimes find it easier to ignore a problem than to confront a brother or sister who is in sin. We pretend everything is ok when it is not. Paul forbids the Corinthians, and therefore forbids us, from taking such a course. Sin must be addressed (cf. 1 Cor 5:1ff; 11:27-32).

Principles: But knowing that sin must be addressed doesn't answer all our questions – how do we address sin faithfully? First and foremost, we must remember that faithfulness involves no personal animosity or harshness. We are all susceptible to the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. None of us is better than another. And so we are to restore those who are overtaken in some trespass in a spirit of gentleness, taking heed to ourselves lest we also be tempted (Gal 6:1). Our goal in pursuing our sinning brother, subordinate only to our loyalty to the Lord and the honor of His Name, is to see our brother or sister restored to fellowship with the Lord and with His body.

Second, we must remember that while formal church discipline strives for the restoration of our erring brother or sister, it also serves other purposes. Our doctrinal standard, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, helpfully summarizes them:

Church censures are necessary, for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offences, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the Gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the Church, if they should suffer His covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders. (XXX.3)

Third, we must keep in mind that while the general pattern for dealing with sin in the body of Christ is made clear (Mt 18:15-20), the details are much harder to discern and require great wisdom and humility. Frequently we must supplement what we learn from one biblical text by comparing it with another, rely on basic biblical principles to guide our conduct, and seek counsel from the elders or other mature Christians.

Finally, we must remember that the majority of “discipline” in a healthy church body is informal and private in nature as Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:15-20 make clear. Initially, discipline involves only the sinner and at most two or three others. Informal “discipline” would include loving one another by holding one another accountable, praying for one another, forgiving one another, and showing grace and mercy to one another. Only in rare occasions does sin necessitate formal church discipline. Indeed, the only sin that would result in excommunication is contumacy – a refusal to repent and acknowledge one’s sin as sin and confess it to the Lord. Repentance restores fellowship.

Implementation: Keeping these things in mind, what are the normal stages of church discipline and how should we relate to individuals who are being disciplined? Matthew 18:15-20 outlines four basic steps in church discipline. The first two steps are private; the second two are public and formal.

Step One: In step one a brother confronts the one in sin privately in an attempt to bring repentance and reconciliation (cf. Gal 6:1). If the sin is acknowledged and the one in sin repents, then the issue is resolved and should not go any further. If the sinning brother denies the allegation and there is no way to confirm the allegation, then the brother should let the matter lie and pray that God would resolve it.

Step Two: If the sinning brother does not repent and there are witnesses who can confirm the allegation, then we are to bring two or three witnesses along to speak with the individual. If he repents, then the issue is resolved and should go no further. If the individual does not repent, then we are to tell the matter to the Church, that is, we are to inform the elders. The elders will then inquire into the accusation.

When the elders are asked to inquire into an accusation, those accused of wrongdoing will be considered innocent until proven guilty. Scripture requires that every accusation be established by two or three witnesses. Consequently, the elders have an obligation to obtain all the facts and make certain that sin is involved before proceeding with the next step of discipline. If there is unrepentant sin, one or more of the elders will formally admonish the individual(s) to repent of his sin and to serve Christ. The goal of such admonishment is to bring an awareness of sin while striving to preserve as much as possible the reputation of the sinner. If the sinner repents, then the issue is resolved and will not become public knowledge.

Step Three: If the admonition of the elders is rejected, the third step of discipline is Suspension from the Supper. Such Suspension is normally public in nature; however, the

elders reserve the right to suspend individuals from the Table privately as the case warrants. The reasons for a public Suspension will be communicated to the church (cf. 2 Thes 3:6, 13-15). The goal of Suspension from the Lord's Supper is to awaken the sinner to the seriousness of his offense. Suspension prohibits the individual from participating in the Lord's Supper and other church sponsored fellowships including, but not limited to, fellowship meals and special feasts. In cases of public Suspension, the individual will normally be notified in writing (1) that he is being publicly suspended from the Table, (2) the date of such Suspension, (3) the reasons for this Suspension, and (4) the path to restoration. In certain circumstances, the elders may also include a fixed period when the Suspension will move toward Excommunication.

Paul makes clear in 2 Thes 3:6, 13-15 as well as in 1 Cor 5:9-11 that members of the church are not to fellowship with those who are under public suspension *as though everything were normal*. We are not to keep company with *anyone named a brother* who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner. Those who bear the Name of Christ in baptism are held to a higher standard than unbelievers. Consequently, when an individual's sin is noted and marked by the officers of the church, the members of the body are to withdraw from such a one *that he may be ashamed*. Yet we are not to consider this individual our enemy, but admonish him as a brother. We should pray for him regularly, longing for him to be restored to fellowship with God and with His people – something that can only happen if the sinner takes ownership for his sin and repents.

What Suspension means on a formal level is that the individual is excluded from sharing in the Lord's Supper and from participating in church sponsored fellowship meals, feasts, etc. On an individual level, the amount of interaction will vary depending on the nature of one's relationship with the individual under discipline and the nature of the discipline case. Individuals are encouraged to seek counsel from the elders on a case-by-case basis. However, in all circumstances, it must be kept in mind that church discipline always involves a measure of shame and pain (cf. Heb 12:5-11). Its purpose is to bring the unrepentant brother or sister back to his senses, back to fellowship with God. So conversations and interactions with him should call him back to the way of life. If we continue treating him as though everything is normal, then this objective simply cannot be achieved. Indeed, we may be the means of destroying our brother or sister by our misplaced compassion. True compassion will call him to forsake his sin and return to the Lord.

Consider as a parallel a child who has been disruptive at the dinner table. His father dismisses him from the table until he is ready to acknowledge his fault and deal with the sin that was causing the disruption. He goes and sits at the bottom of the stairs. While sitting on the stairs, he hears the fellowship of the family and the feasting going on. He hears the joy but he can't participate in it. He is still part of the family, but he is not part of the joy of the family because his sin is separating him from the family. Ideally the son

recognizes his error, returns to the table, seeks forgiveness, and sits down to the meal once more.

But what if, after the father disciplines the child, one of the siblings fails to support the father? He gets up from the table, goes to the bottom of the stairs, and begins to commiserate with his brother. Assuming that the father's action was just, what would be the consequence of the sibling's misplaced compassion? It would undermine the father's responsibility and authority, compromise the effectiveness of the discipline, further disrupt the family, and likely confirm the first child in his rebellion. And it is this that members of the church need to beware doing with their actions toward those who are suspended.

Step Four: The final stage of formal church discipline is Excommunication, removing the individual from the covenant community. When the individual refuses to listen to the church, Jesus insists that the individual is to be to us "like a heathen and a tax collector" (Mt 18:17b). In other words, he is no longer to be considered a Christian in need of correction but an unbeliever in need of evangelism (cf. Tit 3:10-11). The decision to excommunicate a brother or sister is the responsibility of the elders.

As a covenantal rite, excommunication is the counterpart to baptism. Baptism incorporates the individual into the church, marking him out as a member of Christ and His people. Excommunication separates the individual from Christ and His people. The person excommunicated is no longer to be reckoned a believer but an unbeliever. Whereas baptism is a rite of inclusion, excommunication is a rite of exclusion.

Rightly administered, both Suspension and Excommunication speak God's own Word to the sinner. Jesus declares, "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven" (Mt 18:18). The voice of the church ratifies that which God has already declared in His Word. It is an application of the Word of God to a specific situation. As James Bannerman, 19th century Scottish theologian, explains:

In the case of the key of discipline, the office and duty of the Church are simply ministerial, - having power to admit to or exclude from the outward privileges of the Christian society, according as it believes that Christ in His Word has admitted or excluded; but having no power itself to open or shut the door of the invisible Church, or to give or withhold admission to the favour of God. In these respects, the right of discipline exercised by the Church is limited by the authority of Christ as the source of it. In pronouncing absolution or condemnation, the Church is simply declaring the sentence of Christ in the matter, according to its own interpretation of that sentence; it has no independent or mysterious authority itself to absolve from guilt, or to condemn to future punishment. In excluding from or admitting to the fellowship of the Christian society, the Church is merely acting according to its view of how Christ would in the circumstances

*act; and the effect of its sentence can carry with it no more than the giving or withdrawing of outward privileges.*¹

It is entirely possible, of course, that the judgment of the Church is wrong. However, assuming that the application of the Word of God to the situation is accurate, the person excommunicated can have no legitimate confidence that were he to die that God would welcome him into His presence. He has rejected the only sacrifice for sins, Christ Jesus, and trampled under foot the blood of the covenant by which he was distinguished from the world (Heb 10:26-31). And apart from His blood covering our sins, none of us are welcome in the presence of God. Excommunication is the sober announcement that God takes unrepentant sin seriously. We cannot claim the name of Jesus and be living in unrepentant sin (1 Cor 6:9-11; Gal 5:19-21).

When instructing the Corinthians to excommunicate a member of their congregation, Paul writes that excommunication delivers the unrepentant sinner *“to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of our Lord Jesus”* (1 Cor 5:5). The implication of Paul’s words appears to be this: the church hands the individual over to Satan with the express purpose that his course of life become miserable *so that he might be saved in the day of judgment*. In other words, even excommunication is an act of mercy; indeed it is our final act. Excommunication hands the covenant breaker over to the Evil One that he may be taught not to blaspheme (1 Tim 1:20), that he might be humbled and so return to the Lord (cf. Ps 83:15-16). We do not desire the death of the sinner but that he repent.

What Paul’s words imply, therefore, is that excommunication is not the unpardonable sin. After all, Jesus ministered the Gospel to tax collectors and sinners. Those who have broken covenant with God have committed a grave and serious offense. But God’s mercy is greater than our sin and so long as there is breath, there is hope. Upon repentance the one excommunicated can be forgiven and restored to fellowship.

This seems to be the background to Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 2:5-7. It would appear that the Corinthians, having received Paul’s rebuke of their complacency in 1 Corinthians 5, were eager to demonstrate their zeal and so implemented Paul’s words. The offender was excommunicated. In response to the discipline, the man apparently repented and sought to be restored to fellowship in the body. The Corinthians were reticent to take him back – perhaps fearing another exhortation from Paul. But Paul urges them to receive him back and to reaffirm their love for him. Restoration after excommunication is possible.

What this means for our practical interaction with one who has been excommunicated is that we treat him as a non-Christian, but a non-Christian in whom we have an even more vested interest. It should be our heart’s desire that he return to Christ. We pray

¹ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1869] 1960) 2:195-196.

for him, beseeching the Father of Mercy to open his eyes and grant that he might return to the fold. We invite him to come to church, to Bible studies, etc. But we need to be careful not to do things with him as if he is a Christian. The temptation, if he is nice, is to forget that we have proclaimed him to be a non-Christian and not keep the distinction intact.

This is especially difficult if he is a family member. Discussions should be guarded. The non-Christian should be talked to as a non-Christian, not as an ignorant or poor Christian. Beware how you pray together. Of course this will be awkward, but this is the problem with unconfessed sin: it makes everything awkward and difficult. But it needs to be that way for the loved one who has decided to thumb his nose at the Almighty.

Restoration: As has been stated already, one of the primary goals of church discipline is to “gain our brother”, that is, to restore him to fellowship with Christ and His body, the Church. Individuals who have come under formal church discipline can be restored to fellowship at any time.

In cases of *Suspension* from the Lord’s Supper, the individual will be restored to fellowship immediately after he:

- a. Takes responsibility for his sin and confesses it to all injured parties;
- b. Makes appropriate restitution as the case may require;
- c. Manifests a change of heart with appropriate fruit;

The elders will announce this restoration to fellowship to the congregation. In certain circumstances, the elders may request a written statement of confession from the brother or sister that would be read to the congregation.

In cases of *Excommunication*, the individual will be restored to fellowship immediately after he:

- a. Takes responsibility for his sin and confesses it to all injured parties;
- b. Makes appropriate restitution as the case may require;
- c. Manifests a change of heart with appropriate fruit;
- d. Writes a public statement of confession and repentance to be read to the congregation.

The elders will announce this restoration to fellowship and read the public statement of confession and repentance to the congregation.

Support: To assist the congregation in understanding these principles and applying them, the elders commit to:

- a. Regularly addressing the importance of church discipline while preaching the Word.
- b. Outlining the basic process of church discipline in at least one sermon annually.

- c. Making this policy paper readily available – e.g., keeping it posted as a link on our website.
- d. Referencing this paper whenever discipline proceedings are underway.

It is our earnest prayer and hope that these brief guidelines will prove helpful in guiding and directing our interaction with those under church discipline. May the Lord have mercy on our congregation and grant us faithfulness in these matters .