

Church Discipline, Step One: Private Confrontation

Scripture: Matthew 18:15; 1 Corinthians 5:9–13

Code: B140825

Suppose a bomb were found in a house or office building, and the bomb-disposal experts simply stood around waiting for an explosion. What would happen? Likely, people would get hurt. And the so-called experts would be rightly punished for dereliction of duty.

But in the Body of Christ—where unrepentant sin is like a ticking bomb—church leaders often act like an ineffective bomb squad, taking a passive wait-and-see approach to sin in the congregation. And when the inevitable “explosion” happens, they’re left with deeply hurt people and collateral damage.

Even if church leaders take the popular approach of praying for God to deal with the offender(s)—obviously critical to the process, yet not all that’s called for biblically—that is an abdication of their responsibility as shepherds of God’s flock. In fact He expects His people—and not just those in leadership—to take responsibility for sin in the local church (1 Corinthians 5:9–13). In fact, when the church deals with sin according to His will, God Himself places His stamp of approval on the process and result (Matthew 18:18–20).

[Last time](#), we explored what sins qualify for church discipline. We also saw that the initial phase of church discipline is a responsibility that falls on the shoulders of all church members.

Taking the First Step

If we recognize a situation that warrants discipline and our responsibility to initiate that process, how should we go about it? Jesus provides us with the answer: “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private” (Matthew 18:15). The verb translated “go” is a present imperative, meaning that this is a command and not a suggestion. It is not merely an option. If you see your brother in sin, you *must* go.

Jesus was clear that this first phase must be done “in private.” There is no need to involve others in the first stage. Don’t gossip about the offense with others, even under the guise of seeking prayer support. Just go quietly to your brother; tell him his fault between you and him *alone*.

Discipline is difficult with close friends because so much is at stake. Those who know you best may respond by pointing out some sin of yours. Discipline is also difficult with people we don’t know well. We tend to think, *Who am I to intrude into this person’s life?* While we are intimidated by the thought of confronting friends, we tend to be indifferent towards the people we aren’t close to. Either way we must see that what Christ commands in Matthew 28:15 is a solemn Christian duty that cannot to be rationalized away for convenience’s sake.

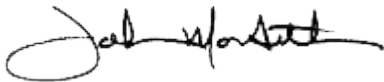
The Greek verb in the phrase “show him his fault” is a word that conveys the idea of light exposing something that is hidden. It calls for a clear, precise divulging of the brother’s offense. “Show him his

fault” does not necessarily imply he is unaware of his sin—the process is not limited to sins of ignorance. Rather, the phrase means that you should disclose what you know about his sin, so that he will realize his offense is known. It establishes his accountability for the offense. If he thought his sin was secret, he must realize it has been uncovered. If he thought he could sin without consequence, he must now give an answer.

If the first step of discipline results in repentance, then that will be the end of the process—in which case, “you have won your brother.” Nothing more needs to be done. You will have a bond of intimacy with him that nothing will be able to break. Of course, you should encourage him to demonstrate the genuineness of his repentance by doing whatever is necessary to make things right.

If any kind of restitution is called for, urge him to follow through. If others have been directly hurt by his sin, he should go to them and seek reconciliation (Matthew 5:23–24). But assuming he demonstrates real repentance, that should end the matter. Uninvolved parties have no need to be told. No further discipline needs to be imposed. You may rejoice in having won your brother.

Ideally, private confrontation should be the final step in the majority of discipline cases. Unfortunately, those who remain unrepentant require the next step in church discipline, which we’ll examine next time.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John W. Stott". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

(Adapted from [*The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*](#))

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