

Church Discipline, Step Two: Bring Witnesses

Scripture: Matthew 18:16

Code: B140827

Unrepentant sin is a deadly spiritual cancer. It cannot be allowed to fester and corrupt the Body of Christ. In Matthew 18, Jesus outlined a multi-step process for dealing with sin in the church. It begins in verse 15 with a private, one-on-one confrontation with the sinning brother. But because not everyone will repent after repeated private confrontations, Christ gave us a second step in verse 16:

But 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. (Matthew 18:16)

Sometimes the sinning brother refuses to hear the private rebuke. He may deny his guilt; he may deliberately continue in sin; he may try to cover up what he has done. Whatever his response, if it is not repentance—and assuming you are *certain* of his guilt—you must now take one or two other believers with you and confront him again.

The presence of one or two others serves two main purposes. First, it turns up the pressure. The people you take with you represent the beginning of the whole church's involvement in the matter. The offender is thus put on notice that if he or she continues in sin, the consequences will only grow more severe. Once again, it must be remembered that the proper objective is nothing less than gaining back your brother. Step one is repeated; you must carefully, patiently, lovingly show him his sin again. But this time it is done in the presence of one or two witnesses.

The second reason for involving one or two others is that they serve as witnesses. The two-witness principle was established in Moses' law (Deuteronomy 19:15). It was designed to ascertain guilt beyond reasonable doubt before any verdict could be made—especially in court cases. Therefore, having witnesses in this second step of discipline also suggests that the end of the process will be a form of judgment if the offender does not repent.

The question is sometimes raised whether the “witnesses” must be witnesses to the original offense. Some hold that view, but it cannot be the meaning in this context—if the witnesses were already aware of the offense, they *also* had an earlier duty to go privately and confront the offender, as mandated by verse 15.

Of course, it is also true that if the offender denies that the offense actually occurred, there needs to be a second witness or some other objective evidence to establish the offender's guilt. The Old Testament principle cited in verse 16 still applies: Every fact must be established by the testimony of at least two or three witnesses. So if a dispute boils down to nothing more than the word of the accused against the word of the accuser, the mere accusation is an insufficient basis for pursuing discipline, and the matter should be dropped.

However, assuming the offender does not dispute the accusation itself and still refuses to repent or forsake the sin, witnesses must be brought in to establish the fact that the offender has been

confronted and failed to repent. They are not necessarily witnesses to the original offense, but rather objective parties who will witness the confrontation. They will be able, if necessary, to confirm what was said privately in case the matter needs to be reported to the church (Matthew 18:17). They are witnesses to the fact that the discipline process itself has been properly followed. And their presence at this stage is as much a protection for the one being confronted as it is for the one doing the confronting.

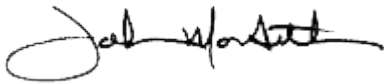
A person is not to be accused of impenitence before the whole church on the testimony of a single witness. In fact, the one or two others might become witnesses in favor of the accused, if it turns out the accuser is being overly harsh or unfair.

But if the accuser wasn't being too harsh, and if the process moves beyond step two, the fact of the offender's impenitence will need to be established by two or three witnesses.

In many cases the person confronted will respond to this second step with repentance. If so, the matter is settled. Assuming he demonstrates his repentance by forsaking the sin and making things right with any injured parties, this should be the end of the matter. It would be inappropriate at this point to broaden the circle of involvement beyond those who are already witnesses.

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (James 5:19–20)

Covering the sin, not exposing it further, is the right and loving response to the sinner who repents. Unfortunately, as with step one, if there is continued unrepentance the disciplinary process must be taken to another level. Next time we'll examine step three.



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

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