

Church Discipline, Step Three: Telling the Church

Scripture: Matthew 18:17

Code: B140828

Modern evangelicalism groans under the weight of church members who persist in sinful lifestyles. The fallout of their conduct is destructive and poisonous, often affecting other believers and sometimes whole congregations. It's the duty of all Christians to protect their churches from the corruption of unchecked sin by following Christ's pattern for church discipline found in Matthew 18.

The first step in that pattern is a private confrontation with the sinning member. If there's no repentance, the next step is to confront the person with one or two witnesses. (More on those steps [here](#) and [here](#).) If the offender still refuses to repent, Jesus' instructions are clear: "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church" (Matthew 18:17).

From a pragmatic perspective, it is easy to think of several reasons for *not* following this command: It's harsh. People will be offended. It's embarrassing for the person being disciplined. It will tarnish the public image of the church. What if the person being disciplined sues the church? The stark reality of the discipline process might drive unbelievers away. People's sin is best dealt with quietly, out of the limelight.

But in the face of all those arguments stands one powerful reason why the church *cannot* afford to ignore this important step of discipline: Christ commanded it. That simple fact means it is therefore required for all who wish to honor Him as Lord.

Bear in mind that the overriding purpose of all discipline is to try *to win the offender back*. That is the goal of this step as well. The church is to be told about the person's sin not as a matter for gossip or public ridicule, but to enlist the help of the entire congregation in appealing to the sinning one.

The process has the same goal in each step. More people are involved at this point in order to pursue the sinning brother more effectively. In essence, the whole church is enlisted to appeal to the brother.

Again we see that discipline is the responsibility of the *whole church*. It is not delegated to an individual. It is not the responsibility of the pastor alone. It is a corporate duty. This approach can protect the church from abuses of power, such as that described by the apostle John:

I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so, and puts them out of the church. (3 John 9–10)

Diotrephes was evidently abusing his power and influence as a leader in that church in order to turn people away and even excommunicate some singlehandedly. That problem persists today in churches where a pastor can wield the authority to fire elders and remove members he doesn't like.

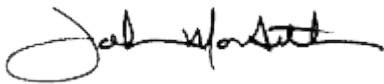
It is never the task of any one man to make such a judgment. Church discipline is a corporate duty, and that is why before anyone is excommunicated, the whole church must be brought into the process. Only *after* everyone in the church has had an opportunity to try to restore the sinning brother is he eventually put out of the church.

After all, the entire church is affected by the offender's sin. If, after all this, the offender repents, it will be the duty of all to reaffirm their love and forgiveness. In 2 Corinthians 2:5–8 Paul gave precisely those instructions:

But if any has caused sorrow, he has caused sorrow not to me, but in some degree—in order not to say too much—to all of you. Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority, so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, otherwise such a one be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. (2 Corinthians 2:5–8)

The whole Corinthian church ultimately became involved in pursuing this sinning person. Apparently he finally responded with repentance. So Paul in essence said, “Now that he has responded, don't hold him at arm's length and browbeat him. Rather, embrace him and forgive him in love.” They had won their brother back.

Sadly, there are times when the offender still refuses to repent even after the first three stages of church discipline. For those situations the Lord provided a fourth and final step in the disciplinary process, a drastic step that we'll look at next time.



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

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