

What is church discipline, anyway?

“Church discipline is the process of correcting sin in the life of the congregation and its members... in its final, formal, and public stage, church discipline involves removing a church member from membership in the church and participation in the Lord’s Table.”

—Jonathan Leeman

We practice church discipline because we love the gospel, we love one another, and we take sin seriously... The best safeguard against facing discipline is to prioritize our discipleship and growth as a church family (Ephesians 4:11-16). When we’re following Jesus together meaningfully and practically, we will be less likely to indulge in sinful desires and hardening our hearts to God and His word in the process.

A. **The Steps of Church Discipline (18:15-17)**

Step 1: Private, one-on-one interaction (v.15)

“The kind of private interaction between you and another person should happen all the time in the context of our relationships with one another. If we would only get this first step right, we might find that about 95 percent of the work of church discipline and restoration has been taken care of before anyone else becomes involved.”

—David Platt

The Goal of Step 1: Repentance and Restoration

Step 2: A small-group interaction (v.16)

When two or three other Christians are speaking out against an unrepentant member, there’s going to be objectivity; we will be able to present before a wayward member the specific sin(s) they are guilty of. (Deuteronomy 19:15; 2 Corinthians 13:1)

The Goal of Step 2: Repentance and Restoration

Step 3: Bringing the matter before the whole church (v.17)

According to Jesus, the local church is the ‘final court’ of church discipline. As members of the church, it’s incumbent on us to be part of a church discipline case because we don’t want unrepentant sin to be ignored or tolerated in our midst. (1 Corinthians 5:6)

The Goal of Step 3: Repentance and Restoration

Step 4: Removing an unrepentant member from the church (v.17)

When we undertake this step, we can no longer treat the person being disciplined as a Christian (no matter what else they may claim about themselves; note the terms Jesus is using in v.17: ‘Gentile’ & ‘Tax Collector’). There should be tears in our eyes when we as a local church excommunicate a member; but let’s remember this is a command from Jesus. (1 Corinthians 5:5)

The (Ultimate) Goal of Step 4 is still... Repentance and Restoration

B. The Authority to Practice Church Discipline (18:18-20)

- The local church renders a **heavenly judgment** (v.18)
What does God who rules over us think about sin? Church discipline is meant to give us a glimpse of this. When we rightly practice church discipline, we are acting in agreement with the perfect judgment and wisdom of God in heaven.

- The local church acts **in accordance to God’s will** (v.19)
God the Father gives his church a metaphorical ‘thumbs up’ to hold accountable a member who is sinning without repentance.

- The local church is promised **the very presence of Jesus** (v.20)
It is our Savior’s presence with us that compels us to push back against evil and ungodliness in the church. As hard as practicing discipline is, Jesus is saying “I pledge to always be with my church, for whom I was glad to lay down my life, in order to see her endure in truth and holiness until the end.”

“Many despise warnings and perish. Happy is he who trembles at the word of the Lord.”

—Charles Spurgeon

Recommended Resource for Further Study:

***Is It Loving to Practice Church Discipline?* (Jonathan Leeman)**