

Church Discipline: Biblical Responses to Various Sins & Errors

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Acts 29 Regional [NW]

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Introduction — Eleven Guiding Principles

Throughout the life seasons of a church community, there are invariably times in which sin and error need to be addressed. Therefore, it is imperative for the people of God to know the various means of resolution God has given in His Word for addressing sins and errors. Each is intended to negatively root out the conditions hindering the learning of holiness and positively teach repentant holiness.

This document is intended to identify various kinds of sins and their appropriate responses. My hope is that this document will help us to be a discerning church that best cares for our people by obeying the counsel of Scripture. To do so we must seek God's wisdom through prayer in each situation, as James 1:5 instructs.

Sadly, there is very little written on the subject of church discipline because so few churches actually practice it with any degree of consistency. Worse still, most of the books on church discipline that I have read are based upon tragic exegetical errors. It is a common error for Matthew 18:15–22 to be used as some sort of blueprint for how to deal with all church-related sin when that is not its original intent. Instead, the Bible provides multiple responses to various people and their sins and heresies. This requires Christians and Christian leaders to use great discernment so they can apply the correct process to each situation rather than either avoiding church discipline altogether or seeking to resolve all issues in the same manner.

Before we begin, it is imperative that we start with the objectives of Scripture on the matter of church discipline.

1. When sin has come between people, the goal is repentance and reconciliation.
2. When a wrong has been committed, the goal is resolution and recompense.
3. Church leaders must always pursue the protection of the gospel's reputation and the well-being of the entire church, not just the interests of individual people who have sinned. This explains why sometimes individuals must be put out of the church (Deut. 17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:24; 24:7; 1 Cor. 5:13; 2 Cor. 2:7; Rev. 2:2).
4. Christian leaders are given authority over such matters in the church and must be careful not to in any way abuse the power that God has entrusted to them (1 Peter 5:1–5).
5. Discipline is unpleasant but, in the end, produces a holy people by distinguishing between the world and the church (Heb. 12:11).
6. The goal of church discipline is to make people self-disciplined, which is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus (Gal. 5:23).

7. All matters in the church, including church discipline, are to be done in a fitting and orderly manner (1 Cor. 14:40).
8. Because the situations causing church discipline can be incredibly frustrating, it is important that those involved don't let their anger lead them into sin (Prov. 16:32; 17:27).
9. For the truth to emerge, both sides of a dispute must be heard before a decision is reached (Prov. 18:17).
10. When at all possible, multiple witnesses should be required (Deut. 19:15; 2 Cor. 13:1).
11. The communion table is a regular time appointed by God when His people are to be reminded that unrepentant sin and unnecessary division in the church are unacceptable to a holy God; therefore, urgent matters are to be settled before partaking the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:17–32).

Responses to a Sinning Christian

When a Christian sins against another Christian

- Matthew 18:15–22 ¹⁵ *“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. ¹⁶ But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. ¹⁸ “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ “Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” ²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” ²² Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*

When someone is a gossip

- Proverbs 16:28 *A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends.*
- Proverbs 20:19 *A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much.*
- 2 Corinthians 12:20–21 ²⁰ *For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. ²¹ I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged.*

When someone who professes faith lives in sin without repentance

- 1 Corinthians 5:1–13 ¹ *It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. ² And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? ³ Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. ⁴ When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, ⁵ hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. ⁶ Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? ⁷ Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸ Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth. ⁹ I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— ¹⁰ not at all*

meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world.¹¹ But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.¹² What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?¹³ God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."

When someone continually blasphemes God

- *1 Timothy 1:18–20¹⁸ Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight,¹⁹ holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith.²⁰ Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.*

When someone appoints themselves to leadership

- *3 John 9–10⁹ I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us.¹⁰ So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.*
- *Revelation 2:2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.*

When someone is divisive

- *Titus 3:10–11¹⁰ Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him.¹¹ You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.*

When someone is an idle busybody

- *2 Thessalonians 3:6, 11⁶ In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.¹¹ We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies.*

When someone commits a minor offense or acts out of character

- *Proverbs 19:11 A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense.*

When a Christian sins and is repentant

- *Galatians 6:1–5¹ Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.² Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.³ If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.⁴ Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take*

pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else,⁵ for each one should carry his own load.

- *2 Corinthians 2:5–11⁵ If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent—not to put it too severely.⁶ The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him.⁷ Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.⁸ I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.⁹ The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything.¹⁰ If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake,¹¹ in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.*
- *Ephesians 4:32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

Responses to False Teaching

When someone in the church encourages false doctrine

- Acts 20:25–31 ²⁵ “Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. ²⁶ Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. ²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹ So be on your guard!”
- 1 Timothy 1:3–7 ³ As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer ⁴ nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work—which is by faith. ⁵ The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. ⁶ Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk. ⁷ They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.
- 1 Timothy 4:1–8 ¹ The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. ² Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. ³ They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. ⁴ For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵ because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer. ⁶ If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. ⁷ Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. ⁸ For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.
- 2 Timothy 4:14–15 ¹⁴ Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. ¹⁵ You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message.
- Colossians 2:8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.
- Romans 16:17–18 ¹⁷ I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. ¹⁸ For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.

- Titus 1:10–11 ¹⁰ *For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group. ¹¹ They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach—and that for the sake of dishonest gain.*

When someone is a habitual, nitpicking doctrinal pest

- 2 Timothy 2:14–26 ¹⁴ *Keep reminding them of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. ¹⁵ Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. ¹⁶ Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. ¹⁷ Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, ¹⁸ who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some. ¹⁹ Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."²⁰ In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. ²¹ If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work. ²² Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. ²³ Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. ²⁴ And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. ²⁵ Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.*
- Titus 3:9 *But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless.*

When someone will only listen to false teachers

- 2 Timothy 4:1–5 ¹ *In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ² Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. ³ For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴ They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. ⁵ But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.*

When someone is a self-righteous legalist

- Galatians 5:7–15 ⁷ *You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?* ⁸ *That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.* ⁹ *“A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.”* ¹⁰ *I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be.* ¹¹ *Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.* ¹² *As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!* ¹³ *You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.* ¹⁴ *The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”* ¹⁵ *If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.*
- Philippians 3:2 *Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh.*

When someone promotes a false gospel

- Galatians 1:6–9 ⁶ *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—* ⁷ *which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.* ⁸ *But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!* ⁹ *As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!*

When someone is sincere but deceived

- 2 Corinthians 11:3–4, 13–15 ³ *But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.* ⁴ *For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. . . .* ¹³ *For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ.* ¹⁴ *And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.* ¹⁵ *It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.*

Responses for Legal Disputes

When the seemingly offended party seeks legal action

- 1 Corinthians 6:1–8 ¹ *If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints?* ² *Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases?* ³ *Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life!* ⁴ *Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church!* ⁵ *I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?* ⁶ *But instead, one brother goes to law against another—and this in front of unbelievers!* ⁷ *The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?* ⁸ *Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers.*

When someone refuses to obey just laws

- Romans 13:1–7 ¹ *Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.* ² *Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.* ³ *For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you.* ⁴ *For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.* ⁵ *Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.* ⁶ *This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.* ⁷ *Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.*

Responses for Church Leaders & Church Members

When someone has been counseled by a church leader

- Hebrews 13:17 *Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.*
- 2 Thessalonians 3:14–15 ¹⁴ *If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed.* ¹⁵ *Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.*
- 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13 ¹² *Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you.* ¹³ *Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.*

When someone leaves the church to pursue sin/heresy

- 1 John 2:19 *They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.*

When someone is not consistently in community

- Hebrews 10:24–25 ²⁴ *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.* ²⁵ *Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*
- Colossians 3:16 *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.*

When a teacher is in moral sin or doctrinal error

- James 3:1 *Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.*

When an elder is in moral sin or doctrinal error

- 1 Timothy 5:19–21 ¹⁹ *Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.* ²⁰ *Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.* ²¹ *I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism.* (see also Deuteronomy 19:15–19)

Answers to Eleven Common Questions

1. Do we only have authority to exercise formal discipline on members and must simply ask others who are unwilling to obey the spirit of Hebrews 13:17 to leave the church and go elsewhere?
2. How do we bring people before the church?
3. What do we do with those people who simply pull membership and/or leave the church?
4. How can our communication forms (e.g., witnesses present, written documents) help to safeguard us from dangerous circumstances?
5. Should we practice confidentiality?
6. What should we do with a disruptive person on Sunday?
7. What should we do with someone who won't leave a person or the church alone?
8. Can we ask a non-Christian to leave the church if we find them dangerous?
9. How should we handle registered sex offenders?
10. How should we handle cross-church discipline?
11. How should severity, frequency, and urgency affect our response?

Sample Church Complaint Form

Before leaving your comments, please check one or more of the following that apply:

I am a

- gossip
- blasphemer
- false teacher
- nitpicker
- wingnut
- liar
- hypocrite
- unrepentant pervert
- otherwise sinful person

If you checked any of the boxes, please write your comments below and then deposit this form in one of the large, black, plastic "comment receptacles" found near the entrances. Thank you.