



Church Discipline

Introduction

AS THE AUSTIN STONE COMMUNITY CHURCH pursues being a New Testament church existing for the supremacy of the name and purpose of Jesus Christ, we seek to make the Scriptures our authority for all of our life together. While God's will expressed in Scripture is less clear on some issues than others, **God speaks clearly throughout the New Testament about the nature of church leadership, church membership, and church discipline.**

The clarity and specificity God has given us around these topics tests who and what we will worship as a church. The same Father who sent Jesus to live for us, die for us and rise from the dead for us is the same God who leads us now by His Word given by His Spirit. We can trust Him in all that He says.

The arguments advanced below, therefore, are our attempt to articulate the theology and practice of church discipline that we at The Austin Stone feel is faithful to the Bible's instruction. We will look at three particular areas:

1. The theology of church discipline
2. The heart behind church discipline
3. The practice of discipline at The Austin Stone

In James 5:19-20, we read:

¹⁹ My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back,
²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

The heart of The Austin Stone elders behind practicing church discipline is to display our deep love for the body of Christ. Demonstrating the fullness of our responsibility as shepherds includes the responsibility of discipline. **We pursue discipline because it is an act of love that reflects the Father's love for us.**

⁶ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

(Hebrews 12:6)

The Theology of Church Discipline

THROUGHOUT THE PAGES of the New Testament, we see God's instruction to us concerning our sin, His character, and the magnificence of Jesus and His atoning work. God has given us specific instruction for how we are to walk in accordance with His will. And the primary context for us to receive and obey His Word is in the church, among and alongside the people of God.

The biblical model for a church is this: a redeemed people who have heard the good news of the gospel and who responded in repentance in faith, gather together to worship, appoint qualified elders and deacons, and faithfully engage in the proclamation and demonstration of the good news of the gospel.

The church also has some specific instructions as to how it should operate. From Jesus' direct teaching to His disciples, we find a particular set of commands for the church on how to approach a brother or sister who is persisting in open sin:

¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence 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, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done

for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

(Matthew 18:15-20)

In this teaching, Jesus lays out a clear pattern as to how we are to love a wayward brother or sister:

1. We first **lovingly confront** an individual alone with evidence of the sin.
2. If the offending brother or sister is clearly in sin according to the Bible and will not repent, we are instructed to **take two or three together** to establish the charge of the offense.
3. If the wayward brother or sister still refuses to repent, we are instructed to **tell it to the church**.
4. Finally, if all the previous steps have been faithfully pursued, we are to **remove that person from fellowship** with the body.

This same process is enumerated and reinforced in several other passages, including 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, Galatians 6:1-5, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, and 1 Timothy 5:19-21.

At The Austin Stone, we believe in the authority and goodness of all Scripture. This means that even with an issue as difficult and painstaking as church discipline, we seek to put Jesus' commands into practice with all love and wisdom.

All of us have fallen into sin and struggle every day against the world, our flesh, and Satan. **Therefore, the expectation of the Scriptures is not that believers walk in perfection, but rather, that believers' lives are marked by true repentance.** When a church member is hardened by sin against repentance, church discipline is God's gracious means to bring them back into fellowship and submission to God and the body of Christ. It sounds the alarm about the ruinous effects of sin, and pleads

with a hardened brother or sister to turn from it (Romans 2:4). The clear message from Scripture about committed church members who fall into the snare of sin is that God may use His community to discipline and restore those members to Himself and His people.

Church discipline is a gift! And what a comfort it is to have a gracious community who will lovingly and gently restore us.

The Heart Behind Church Discipline

WHEN WE HEAR the phrase *church discipline*, some of us may hear nails scraping down a chalkboard. Others might be bombarded with images of overbearing authority. However, the biblical prescription of discipline is not a process of punishment or abuse, but of love and care.

Our community practices formative and corrective discipline. This is not because we enjoy correcting others or shaming our members into submission, but because we genuinely love one another and want God's absolute best for us all. To remain in sin—or to allow others to do so—is not only to rebel against God, but also to miss out on the joy of a life of obedience to Christ.

In most circumstances of sin, God graciously grants His children the gift of repentance when first confronted. The Holy Spirit works in the heart of the believer, and he or she is often thankful that someone cares enough to point out their offense and restore them to obeying God's Word. In Christ, we are made new, and our desires are transformed so

that we want to be a people who humbly receive the faithful words of a friend (Proverbs 27:5-6). In other words, to be a Christian does not mean that you are free from sinning. It means that you no longer live at peace with your sin.

In some cases, however, a brother or sister persists in disobedience to God's explicit commands. They begin to live at peace with their sin. In response, the church must lovingly and graciously submit to the authority of God, escalate the level of discipline, and if necessary, remove the person from fellowship.

The heart of discipline is love, and the hope of discipline is repentance with full restoration to fellowship. Disassociation is painful for all involved, and yet undeniably necessary. The only consolation through the whole process is the hope we have through faith in God's Word: that suffering the loss of their Christian family and all the benefits that come with it would ultimately lead the person under discipline to see the error of their ways and repent.

Furthermore, the discipline process also serves as a warning for the rest of the body (1 Timothy 5:20). The apostles viewed discipline this way. In our flesh, we are all still prone to desire sin more than God; therefore, the church is to discipline in love, so that

its people might grow in holiness, peace, unity, and the fear of the Lord. Church discipline is a reminder and warning to each of us about the destructive, hardening nature of sin.

The Process of Corrective Church Discipline at The Austin Stone

IN THE MAJORITY OF CASES, the process of discipline is informal. In these scenarios, a small group of believers calls on the elders to provide wisdom for how to draw a wayward brother or sister away from their destructive patterns of sin and back to Christ. With guidance from elders, these people walk their fellow believer through the steps of restoration Jesus laid out in Matthew 18 (see “The Theology of Church Discipline” above).

In fewer cases, a more formal approach of corrective church discipline is required. It is essential to note that **each and every step of this formal process is covered in prayer and always practiced in plurality**. In so doing, we ensure that multiple individuals are thinking sincerely and soberly about any given circumstance and the people involved in it.

Step 1

If an elder team is made aware of an accusation of sin necessitating elder involvement, the first step we take is to determine if that information is accurate. We lovingly approach the individual accused, as well as the accuser, with questions about the situation.

Step 2

After careful observation, prayer, and consultation with the elder team, elders will typically discern a process of restoration and give some practical guidelines for repentance. Each circumstance is unique and treated with a great deal of wisdom from Scripture and careful attention to the individuals involved.

Step 3

The repentance process is usually overseen by a point elder in collaboration with an elder team with great care over a period of time. We have seen God work in power through this kind of discipline. He has reconciled marriages, freed individuals from perpetual sin, and unified broken relationships between believers. In a small minority of cases, individuals remain hard-hearted. We then involve their wider community or close friends. In some cases in the past, this step has resulted in repentance.

Step 4

Finally, should an individual persist in sin over a period of time, we acknowledge their decision before the church. In most circumstances, this means sharing relevant details with the partners at the individual's particular congregation. In the life of our church, we have seldom had to do this. However, in the life of our church, certain situations have occasionally required the body of Christ to know about a hard-hearted brother or sister. The purpose of this is not to punish or shame the person in sin, but to help the body pray for and—as appropriate—lovingly challenge that person to consider their heart and seek repentance. We know that if not for God's grace to us, we would all be in a similar situation. So we beg Him for more mercy for ourselves and for that individual in this process.

How Do I Interact with a Person Under Discipline?

When the elders inform the body of an individual who is unrepentant, people often want to know how to interact with that person moving forward. In 1 Corinthians 5:11, Paul writes, “But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.”

We believe this text gives us guidelines for how to handle someone who will not change: we remove the intimate fellowship of communal life together, which most often occurs around meals.

The heart of Paul, and the rest of the Scriptures, is that every believer who comes in contact with an unrepentant brother or sister cannot pretend that nothing is wrong. We have the obligation to love that person, and to love them, in this case, is to remind

them of their continued, ongoing sin. We simply cannot be in their presence without acknowledging their ongoing disobedience.

In the same way that unrepentant sin grieves the heart of God, unrepentant sin grieves God's church. And in the same way that God cannot tolerate sin apart from faith in the work of Christ, God's church also cannot tolerate unrepentant sin from someone not seeking faith in Christ.

If a person in the body has specific questions, such as “What exactly did the person do?” “What if I see this person in public?” and “How do I interact with the person's family?” it is advised they bring those questions to a congregational or central elder.

The Outcome of Church Discipline

AS WE HAVE FAITHFULLY PRACTICED discipline as a body, we are overjoyed that in almost every circumstance, the individual has been brought to repentance and restored with joy! As elders, we determine the nature of a person's repentance over a period of time. Repentance is evidenced by an overall change of mind, heart, and behavior. We will often use the following means to determine repentance:

- Does the person evidence godly sorrow rather than worldly sorrow (2 Corinthians 7:10)? Someone who has worldly sorrow is sorry they got caught. Someone who has godly sorrow is grieved for the sin itself and their offense against God (Psalm 51).
- Does the person have a growing awareness of the impact their sin has had on others?
- Does the person demonstrate a willingness to seek reconciliation with those who have been impacted by their sin, even if this is at great cost to themselves?
- Is the person willing to heed and persist in seeking wise counsel in the process of repentance and reconciliation?

While these questions are not exhaustive, they have proven helpful as a guide for our elders to determine repentance.

For all of us, Paul gives us a very clear admonition in his letter to the Galatians regarding how we are to receive a repentant person back into the church:

¹ Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

(Galatians 6:1-2)

As a grace-filled community of Christ-followers, we have the privilege to welcome and restore a brother or sister who has repented with great joy. In the same way that God rejoices in the repentance of His children, so, too, should the church of God rejoice and restore a brother or sister who has turned from their sin. This means that we all forgive our brother or sister and, in wisdom, seek their restoration back into the community. It is important to note that this process of restoration is spelled out by the elders when the circumstances require formal discipline.

The process and outcome of church discipline remind us that the church of God is the place where sinful people can forgive, restore, and rejoice together in a God who rescues us from our sin.

A Prayer for the Church

IT IS OUR SINCEREST HOPE as we pursue faithfulness to the Word of God, that He would produce the outcome Peter prayed for in the churches of Asia:

²² Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, ²³ since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God ...

(1 Peter 1:22-23)

As we seek holiness, may it produce in us a sincere love for one another and earnest worship of our great Redeemer, Jesus!

Additional Resources

If you would like to study the topic of church discipline further, below are some suggested resources:

- [“A Church Discipline Primer”](#) by Jonathan Leeman
- *God Redeeming His Bride*, by Robert Cheong
- *Systematic Theology*, by Wayne Grudem (Chapter 46)
- *The Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, by Jonathan Leeman

Our elders are always available to speak with you regarding this topic and to answer any questions you may have. You can contact any of your congregation elders by email through austinstone.org/elders.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. When should I seek elder involvement in a situation regarding someone else's sin?

In the following scenarios, we encourage our people to reach out to an elder:

- Someone is in a consistent pattern of unrepentant sin that is contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture, and multiple people have already tried to address it.
- Someone is in gross moral sin that has a significant impact on the lives of others, particularly sexual sin inside the church. This is an issue of wisdom that allows for elders to guide and care for those who have been hurt deeply by sin. It also is motivated by protection of the flock.
- Someone has threatened or is moving toward divorce. This is deeply complicated pastoral and theological territory, and, in wisdom, we want elders involved in these kinds of circumstances.
- You are in a situation where you may feel inadequate to handle whatever has been revealed to you. It is not gossip to have conversations where you lack wisdom. The elders want to help the entire flock grow in the skill of shepherding one another.
- Circumstances where we may need to take legal action, such as situations of abuse or endangerment of a minor. Note: In Texas, all adults are obligated to report suspected neglect or abuse of children to the authorities.

2. Matthew 18:17 says we are to treat a person as a Gentile or tax-collector, which is just an unbeliever in my understanding. Why wouldn't we eat with a person who is an unbeliever?

This seems to be good logic based on Jesus' behavior in the gospel of Matthew, and it would indeed be appropriate to eat with a professing nonbeliever. Likewise in the case of someone who has been excommunicated, meals should be shared only on the condition that they profess to no longer be a believer in Christ.

In this case, we have the biblical mandate to love them with the affection of Christ Jesus and to consistently share the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection for their sin.

If, however, the hard-hearted brother or sister still confesses to being a Christian and yet lives in open rebellion to the explicit commands of Scripture, 1 Corinthians 5:11 gives us clarity on Matthew 18 that we are to "not even eat with such a one."

3. Isn't church discipline judgmental? I thought we were not supposed to pass judgment on one another.

This is an excellent question as well. Thankfully, the Bible is not silent to it. Refer to 1 Corinthians 5:12-13: "For what have I to do with judging out-

siders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. ‘Purge the evil person from among you.’”

After indicating that we are not to eat with a person who confesses Christ but lives in open rebellion, Paul tells us in this verse that we are not to judge “outsiders”—those who are not Christians—but we do have the mandate to judge those inside the church. And we judge insiders through Jesus’ prescribed course of discipline.

This is not the self-righteous judgment that says, “How dare you!” or “I am better than you,” but rather, the loving judgment of the elders and the church that, based on the evidence of a person’s open rebellion, they may not be born again and are certainly resisting the Spirit. We lovingly and with great grief remove them from fellowship for the church’s purity and their good, as to bring about repentance.

4. Is church discipline a punishment?

Church discipline is never a punishment that we give for sin. Christ took all the punishment for sin on the cross! Rather, church discipline is a loving, heartfelt rebuke that comes with great grief on behalf of those who are administering the discipline.

Finally, we want to reiterate that the objective of discipline is repentance and restoration. If the person who has been removed from fellowship repents, we are to receive them gladly back into the church and restore them gently!