Dealing with Sin at Crossroads Bible Church
Crossroads Bible Church – Elders & Staff

The New Testament (1 John 1:5-2:6) makes it clear that sin will continue to be an issue for Christians even after salvation. John also makes it clear that one of the marks of a believer is ongoing, confession of sin based on Christ’s death on the cross. One of the works of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers is bringing conviction for those sins as well as provoking confession and repentance. John also makes it clear that some who claim to be Christians are not, which may be demonstrated by unwillingness to deal with sin in their lives. Some will even leave the fellowship of the church and demonstrate they were never truly saved (1 John 2:19).

Jesus’ teaching anticipated the issue of sin in the assembly of believers and how the church should go about dealing with it. The clearest statement is found in Matthew 18:15-20:

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 Again 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.” (ESV)

The apostle Peter made it clear that sin in the church is a serious issue and must be dealt with through repentance. Failure to repent will bring God’s discipline – in fact, God may discipline His church even before he deals with sin in the world of non-believers.

1 Peter 4:17 (ESV)
17 For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

It is notable that at the very beginning of the church God dealt strongly with sin when Ananias and Saphira lied to the church and to God (Acts 5:1-5). We can only imagine the purifying effect such action had on the believers.

The apostle Paul writes of the terrible impact of personal sin in the church. He gives specific instructions about the action required by others when a person sins and repentance does not follow. His words in Galatians demonstrate both the goal and the attitude that must permeate the process of what is called “Church Discipline.”

Galatians 6:1-3 (ESV)
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. 3 For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.
Biblical correction, admonition, rebuke, and dismissal from the church were once a normal part of church life. In many churches today such discipline has become all but extinct. Church health and holiness seems to have been lost as modernity and post-modernity has popularized a moral relativism and a mystic spiritual individualism that have combined to make "judgment" sound like the most recently coined four letter word.

Such thinking often misunderstands the positive nature of discipline as is made clear in Hebrews:

**Hebrews 12:3-11 (ESV)**

3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. 4 In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5 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. 6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." 7 It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. 11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

**What is Church Discipline?**

Warren Wiersbe, well-known pastor and writer, writes,

... it is not the pastor and official board acting like evangelical policemen to trap a sinning saint and kick him out of the church. No doubt there are churches that have such dictatorial leaders, but this is not what Paul had in mind. Church discipline is to the church member what family discipline is to a child: it is an exercise of, and evidence of, correcting love. When a parent disciplines his child, he is not a judge punishing a criminal; he is a loving father seeking to make his child a better person 1.

We understand and practice church discipline at Crossroads as a process of lovingly dealing with sin in the lives of believers or, at least, those who profess to be believers. It begins with informal, person-to-person reproof. Only if there is no repentance, does it move to a more formal, more public level of discipline which brings in the leadership of the church who then act with the authority of Christ. (see below).

We should note that it is our failure to discipline ourselves when convicted of sin by the Holy Spirit that leads to the intervention of others. In most cases, a growing Christian will respond to the gentle rebuke of individuals – often in the context of ongoing discipleship. This kind of accountability occurs regularly and often in a healthy church so the process rarely proceeds beyond the initial, private meeting.

---

1 *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books
The Purposes of Church Discipline

1. To **correct**, **restore** and **reconcile** a Christian who has been ensnared by sin (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1). Our purpose must be to save the offender, not to drive him away, and to do so with an attitude of love and tenderness. The word “restore” in Gal. 6:1 means “to set a broken bone” – think of the work of compassionate healing involved with that process even when it brings pain to the injured as the bone is set.

2. To **protect the purity** of the church & the name (or, honor) of God. When a church member continues to sin in ways that are outwardly evident to others, especially unbelievers, it brings dishonor to Christ. Holy living on the part of God’s people is vital to our witness. Paul clearly states that when the Jews disobeyed God’s law it led unbelievers to scoff and blaspheme God (Ro. 2:24). Pastor Jerry Mitchell reminds us of the serious nature of sin in the church when he says, “the blessing of God may be removed when a church does not deal with sin in their midst”.

3. To **keep sin from spreading** to others. This principle is clearly stated in 1 Cor. 5:6-7:

   Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

   The principle is expressed in the 1 Timothy 5:19-21 regarding the discipline of sinning leaders:

   Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. (ESV)

What Sins are the Subject of formal church discipline?

---

2 Theologian Wayne Grudem adds:
“...”

---

3 of 11
There doesn’t seem to be any limitation in Scripture – that is, there is no explicit limitation to the kinds of sins that should be confronted. However, certain sins are specifically mentioned in the context of discipline and serve as examples:

- A factious, divisive person\(^3\) (Ti. 3:10-11)
- Adultery, sexual immorality (1 Cor. 5:9)
- Greed or covetousness (1 Cor. 5:10). Teaching of wrong doctrine (Ti. 1:10-14)
- Idolatry (1 Cor. 5:11) – e.g., adhering to false religious systems?
- Reviling, i.e., Slander (1 Cor. 5:11)
- Swindling (1 Cor. 5:11)
- Idleness, unruly living (1 Th. 5:14; 2 Th. 3:6-15).

The principle we follow is that publicly known or outwardly evident sins must be confronted. Hidden, or secret, sins are in the realm of the Holy Spirit (e.g., Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5:1-11; Luke 12:2-3 indicates that secret things will be exposed). In practice, sinfulness which leads to increasing levels of discipline tend to be presumptuous or arrogant sins where one knows the commands of God, but chooses to disobey them.

Discerning the need for formal steps of discipline in any specific situation, or for specific sins, may require the judgment and insight by the mature leaders (elders) in the local church. Matt. 18:18-19 indicates that the leaders have authority to determine what is right in discipline situations and 1 Cor. 6:1-11 indicates that godly leaders should be up to the task. 2 Cor. 2:10 implies that church leaders should make definitive decisions.

**The Proper Attitude as We Carry Out Church Discipline**

Church discipline today usually goes to one of two extremes. Most common is no discipline at all, and church health is slowly undermined because of disobedience and sin. Or church leaders become religious “policemen” who violate many of the Bible’s spiritual principles. At Crossroads when we must undertake discipline we seek to do so with the spirit indicated in Scripture:

- An attitude of mourning – 1 Cor. 5:2
- A spirit of gentleness and a willingness to bear the burdens of our sinning brother. We must be willing to engage in the process of restoration following repentance. – Gal. 6:1-2.

\(^3\) Note: there is a difference between division and dissent. Division involves attempting to set people in the church against the leadership. This is also rebellion and schism, which are sinful and subject to admonition and discipline. Another church has said: “the Bible’s teaching on obedience does not mean the church can outlaw dissent when expressed legitimately. When members conscientiously disagree with a direction advanced by leaders, they have the right to express dissent. This dissent should be expressed in a way that safeguards the unity of the church, is respectful, not bitter, and in love.”
The Pattern, or Practice of Church Discipline – What is our practice at Crossroads?

The most complete pattern for discipline is outlined for us by Christ in Matthew 18:15-18 which moves from informal to formal discipline as more people become involved. Jesus makes it clear that acknowledgement of the sin and repentance stops the process as that is the goal.

The following chart helps to understand the process outlined in Matthew 18:

**Step 1: Private confrontation/reproof**

If a brother or sister sins against me (either deliberately or unknowingly), I should go to that person **privately** and seek to get the matter settled. The big mistake Christians

---

4 Chart is from Grace Community Church, first drafted by Pastor Tim Jack.
make when another believer wrongs them is telling others and not going to the person directly. We should not “share our concern” with a prayer group; tell the Pastor or elders; or turn the issue into a public prayer request. Only if the person refuses to deal with the matter should I bring anyone else in; and the issue must not go to others in the church family until every other means has been exhausted. From Matthew 18:21-35 it would appear that there should be a patient willingness to forgive repeatedly as long as there is true repentance each time.

In most cases there will be quick repentance prompted by the work of the Holy Spirit and no further action will be required.

**Step 2: Confrontation with witnesses.**
If there is no repentance, I should bring one or two others with me and confront the sin again. The witnesses are to confirm that proper confrontation has taken place, they are not necessarily witnesses to the offense – though that would seem preferable. This is also a private confrontation, and if repentance is the response the matter is ended.

**Step 3: Tell it to the church.**
If there is still no repentance the process becomes formal and involves the Elders of the church. No explicit process for “telling the church” is given or even implied in Jesus’ instructions, but whatever process is used, it must be done “decently and in good order” as should all things in the church (1 Cor. 14:40). This step brings more people, with greater authority, into the process of confrontation and healing. It also makes the sin public.

In practice at Crossroads we see this as a broad process where the Elders of the church are made aware of the sin, and where they must determine the next actions to take in “telling it to the church.” The Elders may choose to make personal contact, or to communicate first with a smaller group of members that have a relationship with the sinning brother or sister with the hope that such accountability may result in repentance. If there is no acknowledgement of sin or acts of repentance they may inform all church members of the situation - encouraging those who know the sinning individual to prevail on the him or her to repent. Those who do not know them personally will be encouraged to pray, and all will be charged to refrain from gossip or other sin in the spirit of Galatians 6:1. This communication to the membership will normally be by letter limited to the church membership and will indicate the biblical nature of the sin but not the specifics. The church is told of the sin because the sin is named in the letter. Yet the specifics of the sin are not included, maintaining the gentle hand which the hoped for restoration calls for.

**Step 4: Remove the sinning brother or sister from fellowship – they are dismissed from membership in, and participation at, Crossroads Bible Church.**
If there is still no repentance in response to the above Jesus says they are to be “to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” In the culture of the day this would mean avoiding the individual. They would not be allowed to be part of the fellowship of the Jewish assembly.

1 Corinthians 5:11 clearly states that we are “not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother” who is in unrepentant sin - “not even to eat with such a one.” Similar statements prohibiting fellow Christians from having anything to do with unrepentant sinners are found in Titus 3:10, 2 Thessalonians 3:6 & 14 and 2 John 10.

1 Cor. 5:9-13 makes it clear that though this may seem harsh, it is the appropriate action to take towards one who continues in sin while claiming to be a Christian.

**1 Corinthians 5:1-13 (ESV)**

1 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. 2 And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. 3 For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. 4 When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. 6 Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. 7 I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— 8 not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. 9 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. 10 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? 11 God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

When we have to take this final step at Crossroads, we will inform the membership in another letter which will note the general nature of the sin, but not the specifics. Once again the church is told of the sin because the sin is named in the letter. Yet the specifics of the sin are not included, maintaining the gentle hand which the hoped for restoration calls for. The Elders of Crossroads Bible Church have never taken this step lightly.

**Step 5: Restoration & Reconciliation**

While this process may seem harsh, it is, as noted above, the most loving thing to be done. It is loving to the sinning Christian as his persistent sin is damaging to him and removes him from the blessing and protection of God (Jude 21). It is loving to the Body of Christ as it protects them from the effects of sin. It is loving towards our Lord as it reflects our commitment to the holiness for which he died. Our desire is not for
vengeance. The process is not to be carried out in a vindictive manner. The ultimate goal is restoration to God’s blessings, and reconciliation with the God’s church.

Paul indicates that even the most egregious sins are to be forgiven when there is true repentance, even after one is removed from fellowship. If a disciplined member should request a meeting with an elder or pastoral staff member to communicate his or her repentance, the meeting should occur with thanksgiving. The goal must always be restoration (Matthew 18:15), and we must forgive and comfort the truly repentant (2 Corinthians 2:7). Determining the nature of true repentance may require wise judgment on the part of church leaders. Thomas Watson, Puritan minister, gave six essential marks of the truly repentant. He (or she):

1. will see himself as a sinner (Luke 15:17).
2. will have a godly sorrow (2 Cor. 7:9)
3. will confess his sin for what it is (1 Jo. 1:9)
4. out of a deep hatred for that sin he will turn unreservedly away from it to Christ and his holiness.
5. will seek forgiveness from others whom he has wronged.
6. where money has been wrongly taken he will make restitution to the best of his ability. (The principle is that he will make right whatever he can.)

Paul urges restoration to the fellowship upon repentance. In one case, he had rebuked the church in Corinth for their failure to put a man out of the church due to evident sexual immorality (1 Co.5:1-13). The church apparently followed his stern command, putting the man out. The discipline had its intended result – the man was a true believer and the consequences of losing fellowship brought him to repentance. Unfortunately the church was also slow to restore the man and forgive him leading Paul to encourage restoration quickly and bring comfort to this individual.

2 Corinthians 2:6-11 (ESV)

6 For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, 7 so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8 So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. 9 For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. 10 Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, 11 so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

Determining whether true repentance has taken place may be hard at times, yet we desire to follow Paul’s instructions as soon as possible. We believe that God will give wisdom to godly church leaders so that they might determine true repentance in any situation.

The repentance of an individual disciplined by the Church should be brought to the attention of an Elder or pastor who should, at the next Elder Council meeting, request
the formation of a committee of two to three Elders and/or pastoral staff who will meet with the brother or sister and report back to the Council regarding the spiritual state of the person. The Elder Council must then affirm that true repentance has occurred.

If this is the affirmed, then as Heaven rejoices at the return of a sinner (The parable of the Prodigal Son, Matthew 15:11-32), the return of the brother or sister will be announced to the Church by letter to the members with rejoicing. The Elder Council will determine whether some kind of accountability relationship should be set up for a limited period of time. If membership has been severed for longer than one year, the returning member should attend the new members class and participate with the other potential members in all aspects of the membership process.

**Further Questions:**

*Do we exercise discipline only with members? What about a non-member? What about a non-Christian who chooses to attend CBC?*

The goals of church discipline are threefold:

1. **To restore a Christian who has fallen into sin.**
   By the discipline we hope to gain our brother or sister (Matthew 18:15).

2. **To keep others in the Church from sin.**
   We also hope to keep the leaven of sin from spreading and leavening the whole church (1Corinthians 5:6-13).

3. **To maintain the purity of the Church.**
   Finally, the church itself is something precious which we must guard to keep pure, as Christ wishes, for “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless.” Ephesians 5:25-27.

These goals can only be met if we practice discipline, as required, with all professing believers that regularly attend Crossroads Bible Church - including those who are not yet members.

The discipline pattern is communicated to members as part of the membership process and any member who chooses to engage in sin and remain in a persistent unrepentant state of sin should expect to be removed from membership as outlined here.

**Non-members** who profess faith in Jesus Christ, yet choose to engage in evident sin, and remain in a persistent unrepentant state may be asked to leave the fellowship of Crossroads Bible Church if they do not respond to personal rebuke or confrontation. The Elders will carefully consider whether the dismissal should be made public.
**Unbelievers** are not subject to church discipline, nor do we separate from unbelievers as a matter of regular practice. In rare circumstances, unbelievers may intend harm to the fellowship and the Elders are strongly charged with protecting the flock from such behavior. Such men or women may be restricted from participation in the church. For example, a man who displays inappropriate behavior towards children; or a man who demonstrates predatory sexual behavior towards women.

**If a member asks to be removed, or otherwise leaves the church, do we stop the process of formal discipline?**

No. First, because the goal of discipline is repentance leading to reconciliation. To allow a Christian to leave to so that he might avoid the consequences of his sin does is not an acceptable compromise as it leaves the individual outside the blessing of God. Second, the goals of church discipline extend beyond the individual involved. Discipline is also to discourage sin in others as well. Third, discipline speaks to the issue of the purity of the church and demonstrates our conviction that the holiness for which Christ gave his life is not to be mocked by tolerating unrepentant sinfulness. The Elders will not suspend the disciplinary process if a member asks to be removed from membership or otherwise leaves the Church.

**How do we know whether a person is truly repentant? Isn’t being sorry about the situation enough?**

We are all called to repentance – which is a change of mind resulting in a change in action. Our very salvation included “repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38). Even as believers we demonstrate our repentance from ongoing sin through the “performance of deeds appropriate to repentance” (Acts 26:20). True repentance includes sorrow for sin, yet sorrow alone is not enough. We noted above “six essential ingredients of the truly repentant” as outlined from scripture by Thomas Watson. Repentance on the part of a believer will involve understanding that we have sinned, sorrow for our sin (not just the consequences), and confession (publicly, if necessary) of our sin (1 John 1:9; 2 Co. 7:10). Finally, there will be evident acts and behavior that outwardly demonstrate the reality of the change of mind and heart in the Holy Spirit.

**Would Crossroads discipline someone based on information disclosed in counseling?**

While it is true that some churches hold to the absolute confidentiality of the counseling session Crossroads does not. Pastoral counseling at Crossroads is confidential subject to the limits imposed by Scripture and the state. We are mandated by state law to disclose certain abuse, and scripture does not preclude the use of information gained in counseling in the church discipline process. We are under a mandate to discipline ongoing unrepentant sin thus we also would want to take action against unrepentant sin as a part of the counseling process.
This should not interfere with the need for honest disclosure in the pastoral counseling process. If an individual discloses a sin and has repented of the sin, there will be no need for discipline.

**Must all the steps be followed every time? Is there any indication in Scripture of an exception?**

The pattern given by Christ in Matthew 18 is designed to ensure the veracity and integrity in the process of dealing with sin in the church. While circumstances may arise which would cause the Church to slightly modify a specific step of the church discipline process; the process should not be altered in any significant manner.

There may be situations where the sin is so evident and manifest to so many that the some of the informal steps may by-passed. Paul does when he addresses the known sin of immorality in the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 5). Also, the rebuke of an Elder’s sin seems to be somewhat different, and more public, than general church discipline (1 Tim. 5:19-21).