Six steps in Church Discipline

-Matthew 7:1-5; 18:15-17-

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When someone becomes a follower of Jesus Christ, he humbles himself like a little child, and becomes part of a spiritual family. He is numbered, to use Jesus’ words, among “these little ones who believe in me” (Matthew 18:6). The apostle Paul described it this way: “In Christ, we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12:5; cf. I Corinthians 12:24-27).

Believers form a spiritual family of brothers and sisters in Christ. Our loyalty to Christ and to those who belong to Him is to be so significant that we will not allow any other earthly relationships to compromise it. In fact, very often those relationships become strained when a person becomes a follower of Christ (see Matthew 10:32-37). Our love for the Lord Jesus, which is demonstrated in our love for those who belong to Him, is superior to the love we have in relationships outside of Christ. Among the followers of Christ, there is a spiritual unity that is so powerful that it overcomes the kinds of social or ethnic distinctions that separate people in the larger culture (e.g. Jew/Gentile; slave/free).

In Matthew 18:15 Jesus uses a family reference, when he says, “If your brother sins…” “Brother” is not meant as an exclusive reference to male members of the Church. What Jesus teaches could also apply to “sisters” in Christ. It could be understood this way, “If a fellow member of the church sins…. “What should our response be when a fellow member sins—whether it is “against us” or not? Should we say, “That’s his business, who am I to judge him?” No. Jesus said, “Go and show him his fault just between the two of you.” It begins with “private confrontation.” But, before this step, there needs to be “personal preparation” (see: Matthew 7:3-5). We should move from 1) Personal preparation to 2) Private confrontation (cf. O.T. Leviticus 9:17-18).

The third step is 3) Private conference, which only becomes necessary, if the one confronted has an obstinate attitude (v. 16). When a sinning member of the church refuses to heed the confrontation of a fellow believer, thus refusing to be restored to proper fellowship, the circle of confrontation needs to broaden so that it includes one or two others (This is based on an O.T. principle from Deuteronomy 19:15; Numbers 35:30; and Deuteronomy 17:6). Assuming that the one who made the initial confrontation kept the matter between himself and the sinning member, who should he enlist for the third step? Jesus said, “One or two others,” but who should be called on for involvement in this confrontation?

People who are spiritually prepared (Matthew 7:3-5)
People who are spiritually mature (Galatians 6:1)
People entrusted with spiritual oversight (I Peter 5:1-4; Acts 20:28)

Nothing in the text requires that these people be eyewitnesses to the sin being confronted. If they had been, they should have gone to confront the member themselves. Ideally, it would be good to include people who are known and respected by the erring member (e.g. small group leaders). This is not always possible.
What is the function of the one or two witnesses? They are there “so that every fact may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses” (v.16). Their purpose is not to threaten or intimidate, but to help the erring member to understand the seriousness of the matter. Their main purpose is not to evaluate the truthfulness of the charge, but to strengthen the rebuke and the call to restoration. After private conference, if the erring member remains obstinate and unwilling to acknowledge and repent of the sin, Jesus teaches a fourth step. Each of the four steps has as its primary aim the restoration of the brother to proper fellowship.

The fourth step is 4) Public announcement (v. 17a). Jesus said, “Tell it to the church (i.e. to the “ekklesia,” the assembly).” This step is a sobering reminder that sin is not merely private and personal matter for a Christian. Sin that separates and alienates believers must be dealt with and resolved. But how do we take this step of public announcement? In our church, it would be communicated to the covenant members through a special meeting of the membership. Some churches make these announcements during communion. Others will use a letter to the membership.

To avoid litigation, it is important for churches to specifically outline these steps in their constitutions. Churches have been sued for following the guidelines in Matthew 18:15-17 and have lost in court because they lacked specific reference to the steps. Churches also are wise to limit the public announcement of discipline to those who are actual members. Remember, membership as a process can protect the church, and discipline of non-members is sticky territory.

The fifth step is 5) Public confrontation. In v. 17b, Jesus implies that the church (as an assembly) has made an appeal to the erring member. When the church is informed, it seems to imply that the pastors will be involved. And when this happens, it should be accompanied by warnings about the need for the whole assembly to avoid:

- Gossip and slander
- A proud, critical spirit (Matthew 7:3-5; Galatians 6:1)
- A lenient or punitive attitude
- Playing spiritual detective

People should be encouraged to pray for repentance and restoration, and to appeal to their fellow member to submit to the leadership of the Church. In such an appeal, one might say, “I don’t know all the details, nor is it my place to know them, but I do want to encourage you to make things right with the church.”

No one should give the erring member the feeling that he is in good fellowship with the Church (cf. II Thessalonians 3:12-14). Never act in cross-purpose with the church. We should not do anything that would cause disrespect for the leadership. Remember the goal: “Win your brother.” It is redemptive! But in step six, 6) Public exclusion (removal from membership), the goal is also judicial. The primary aim of this step is to protect the purity of the assembly (see: I Corinthians 5:1-11). Failure to practice these steps invites God’s discipline on the entire assembly (see: I Corinthians 11:30-32; Revelation 2:5, 16, 20-23; 3:3-19).

Review the six steps:

1) Personal preparation (7:3-5)
2) Private confrontation (18:15)
3) Private conference (18:16)
4) Public announcement (18:17a)
5) Public confrontation (18:17b)
6) Public exclusion (18:17c)
Reconciliation is a process

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Differing from forgiveness on the personal level, reconciliation is a process that is conditioned on the attitude and actions of the offender. Its aim is restoration of a broken relationship. Those who commit significant offenses against others must be willing to recognize that reconciliation is a process. Even if the offender confessed his wrong to the one he hurt, and appealed for forgiveness, the offended person could say, "I forgive you, but it might take some time for me to regain trust and restore our relationship."

Regaining trust and Restoring a broken relationship:

Important distinction to observe:

A minor grievance should be covered in love (I Peter 4:8), allowing for an unbroken relationship.

A serious offense which has driven a wedge between two people requires confrontation in love (Matthew 18:15-17; Ephesians 4:15a). Such confrontation is the beginning of the process of reconciliation.

Note: In cases involving violent crimes, it might be best (and the only safe option) that no contact occur between the victim and the perpetrator.

What if the offender doesn’t think he has done anything wrong?

However, when an offender does not see that he has done anything wrong, the offended party will need to put distance between himself and the offender. The act of setting boundaries for the relationship with the person who hurt us is designed to both protect us from future hurt and promote conviction in the life of the offender. In such cases, the process of regaining trust and restoring a broken relationship will be more difficult. The offended person must commit the situation to the Lord and accept the change of relationship.

In the context of the local Church, however, unreconciled relationships must be resolved for the preservation of the unity of the Church. This often requires the involvement of the Church leadership following the pattern of Matthew 18:15-17.

Confirming genuine repentance

When an offended party works toward reconciliation, the first and most important step is the confirmation of genuine repentance on the part of the offender (Luke 17:3). Step 1. Confirmation of genuine confession and repentance

"If we can restore to full and intimate fellowship with ourselves a sinning and unrepentant brother, we reveal not the depth of our love, but its shallowness, for we are
doing what is not for his highest good A forgiveness which bypasses the need for repentance issues not from love but from sentimentality (John R. W. Stott. Confess Your Sins, p.35).

**Seven signs of genuine repentance:**

The offender:

1. **Accepts full responsibility for his actions.** (Instead of: "Since you think I’ve done something wrong…” or “If have done anything to offend you…”).

2. Accepts accountability from leaders and others.

3. Does not continue in the sin or anything associated with it.

4. Does not have a defensive attitude about his being in the wrong.

5. Does not have a light attitude toward his sin.

6. Does not resent doubts about his sincerity- nor the need to demonstrate sincerity. (Especially in cases involving repeated offenses)

7. Makes restitution wherever necessary.

**Thoughts on Restitution**

"Restitution gives the offender an opportunity to make amends for sin and to demonstrate by actions that he or she wishes to be restored to the injured person and to society in general. The harder you work to make restitution and repair any damage you have caused, the easier it will be for others to believe your confession and be reconciled to you. For those who believe restitution was something only intended for O. T .times, "...restitution is a sign of taking responsibility for one's actions, and nothing in the Bible indicates that God wants believers to be less responsible in this age than they were before the advent of Christ."

"... being forgiven does not necessarily release the offender from responsibility to repair the damage. Certainly, an injured party may exercise mercy, and in some cases it is good to waive the right to restitution (Matt. 18:22-27). But in many cases making restitution is beneficial even for the offender. Doing so demonstrates remorse, sincerity, and anew attitude, which can help to speed reconciliation (Luke 19:8-9). At the same time, it serves to ingrain lessons that will help the offender avoid similar wrongdoing in the future (see Ps.119:67, 71; Prov.19:19)" (Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker, pp. 217-19*).
Note about confirming genuine repentance:

An unrepentant offender will resent your desire to confirm the genuineness of his confession and repentance. He might resort to lines of manipulation like, “I guess you can’t find it in yourself to be forgiving” or “You just want to rub it in my face” or “I guess I should expect that you want your revenge” or “Some Christian you are, I thought Christians believed in love and compassion.”

Don’t be manipulated into avoiding this first step! Use these signs carefully and be as certain as you can of your offenders repentance. It is hard to genuinely restore a broken relationship when the offender is unclear about his repentance.

Also remember that even God will not grant forgiveness to one who is insincere about his confession and repentance. The person who is unwilling to forsake his sin will not find forgiveness with God (Proverbs 28:13).

Of course, only God can read hearts-- we must evaluate actions. We must not allow superficial appearances to be in control (e.g. tears or “seeming to be really sorry”).

A vivid description of genuine confession and repentance (II Corinthians 7:8-11)

Feeling sorry for our sin is not in itself a sign of genuine repentance. Tears or displays of emotional anguish can be misleading because sorrow can be wrongly directed and used to manipulate others.

Notice the contrast in v. 10- “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.”

Worldly sorrow and Godly Sorrow Contrasted

"Worldly sorrow' means feeling sad because you got caught doing something wrong or because you must suffer the unpleasant consequences of your actions, such as financial loss, a broken marriage, a damaged reputation, or merely nagging guilt. Any normal person will feel regretful when faced with these circumstances. Before long, however, worldly sorrow dies away, and most people begin to behave just as they did before. Instead of changing their thinking and conduct, they simply try harder not to get caught again ...godly sorrow means feeling bad because you have offended God. It means sincerely regretting the fact that what you did was morally wrong, regardless of whether or not you must suffer unpleasant consequences. It involves a 'change of heart' -which is possible only when you understand that sin is a personal offense against God himself (2 Chron. 6: 37-39; cf Jer. 31: 19). Godly sorrow will not always be accompanied by intense feelings, but it implies a change in thinking, which should lead to outward changes in behavior." (Ken Sande, The Peacemaker)
The key in v.10 is that godly sorrow brings (or produces) repentance. Repentance is a change of mind or heart which, when genuinely from God, always leads to a change in behavior (Acts 26:20; Matthew 3:8; Titus 2:14;3:8). The words in v. 10 translated, “that leads to salvation” should be understood as “pointing to” or “indicating the genuineness of” salvation. By contrast, worldly sorrow brings death because it is sinful and all sin ends in death (Romans 6:23a; James 1:14-15). Worldly sorrow is self-centered and is typified in Cain’s self-pity over the consequences brought on by his sin.

How did godly sorrow demonstrate itself among the believers at Corinth? After Paul had confronted the congregation about their refusal to properly deal with a sinful member, they responded with godly sorrow.

**Seven characteristics of godly sorrow:**
See what this godly sorrow has produced in you:
1. Earnestness- intense and earnest care
2. Eagerness to clear yourselves -a desire to be exonerated
3. Indignation -probably toward themselves for allowing sin to go unchecked in their assembly ( or, toward the sinful member cf. 2:6-7)
4. Alarm/fear - toward God for their failure to respond properly to his apostle (cf. 4:21)
5. Longing- a desire to be restored to their proper place and to fellowship with Paul.
6. Concern -a burning desire to do what is right
7. Readiness to see justice done -i.e. to see things be corrected and made right.
   Because of their repentance, the apostle could say to them, "At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter."

Overall, this model of godly sorrow reflects a willingness to take seriously the offense/s committed. True repentance flows out of humility (Luke 18:9-17), and a readiness to accept responsibility and change the sinful behavior.