



TRINITY GRACE CHURCH

Membership Commitments

Membership & Discipline

Throughout its pages, the Bible sounds a recurring theme: those God loves He disciplines.¹ Discipline is a sometimes challenging process through which God corrects his people's thoughts, words, and behavior so they can fulfill their calling to become like Him.

God disciplines his people through a variety of means. He calls his people first to self-discipline. Each Christian is called to hear the Word of God as he reads the Bible and hears the Bible taught and applied. As he compares his life to God's Word, he adjusts himself to conform to his Savior.

But individual interaction with God through his Word is not the only means that God uses to make his children holy. God also uses his people. "Brothers," writes Paul, "if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness..."²

As members of Trinity Grace Church, we take seriously our responsibility to "restore" members who fail to allow God to discipline them personally for their sins. This process of restoration is often referred to as church discipline. Church discipline may be necessary because of sinful words, sinful behavior, or refusal to turn from heretical doctrine. This means that beginning with private confrontation and, if necessary, leading to public rebuke, we seek to help one another overcome any refusal to repent of those words and actions that the Bible clearly defines as sin.³

In addition to the restorative purpose described above, church discipline also serves to guard and preserve the honor of God by protecting the purity of God's church.⁴ God has purposed his church to be a primary manifestation of his glory in this world. As such, the presence of unrepentant, sinful behavior within the church tarnishes the glory of God which is being displayed to the world through his church. The church discipline process serves to protect the integrity of this representation by the church of God's glory.

¹ "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 12:5-6; see also verses 7-13.

² Galatians 6:1

³ Other New Testament passages (besides Galatians 6:1 and Matthew 18:15-17) that support this practice include: 1 Corinthians 5; Acts: 20:28ff; Galatians 2:11-14; 1 Timothy 5:20; Titus 3:10-11; Romans 16:17; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

The Process of Church Discipline

Jesus outlined a process for church discipline in Matthew 18:15-17.⁵ Initially, the process is informal: if a member or other Christian observes ongoing, unrepentant sin in a member, he or she should graciously confront that person. If the person refuses to repent, then the concerned brother or sister should involve one or two others, which may include a pastor. If this group confirms that, in fact, the sin or doctrinal error continues without repentance, the church will initiate formal steps.

When the church begins to formally discipline a member, one or more of the pastors will meet with the member to confirm fact and to appeal for change. The pastors may also inform certain other members of the church of the erring member and his sin, urging these other members to contact the member and appeal for repentance. During this time, the member under discipline may not participate in the Lord's Supper.

If, after a reasonable period of appeal,⁶ no repentance is forthcoming, the pastors will inform the church of the unrepentant sin and that they must remove the individual from the church membership. The pastors may inform the church by either (1) making an announcement at a private meeting of the church; or (2) if there are circumstances which in the discretion of the pastors require a more immediate notification, sending a notification to each member. The pastors may communicate that the individual will be removed from membership as a result of unrepentant sin, describe the nature of the sins which require removal from membership and the process undertaken by the pastors in coming to this decision, and provide any other information relevant to the situation.

Relating with Removed Members

Church discipline involves first confronting in love and gentleness and, if unsuccessful, withholding biblical fellowship. Church discipline has nothing to do with "shunning" a person. It is not a complete rejection of a relationship but a change in the nature of a relationship. Thus, it is appropriate for members of the church to interact with a person who has been removed from membership following church discipline, but they should not interact with them like they would other believers. Rather, they should appeal for the former member to turn from sin and put his or her faith in Jesus' work on the cross. If a person under discipline is not factious or disruptive or a harmful influence, he is welcomed to attend all church meetings that are open to unbelievers with the exception of small groups that meet for the purpose of fellowship.

Once the pastors make a member's sin known to the church, they commit as well to inform the church of that member's repentance and restoration to fellowship as appropriate to the situation and the good of the church.

⁵ "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. 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. 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."

⁶ The pastors may decide to abbreviate the process of appeal for repentance if the sin is especially notorious, or if the member proves to be factious, disruptive, or leading others into sin or error. In these cases, the pastors may ask church members to avoid all contact with an individual in order to mitigate his sinful influence.

Voluntary Withdrawal of Membership to Avoid the Disciplinary Process

At times, a member may seek to withdraw from the church to avoid church discipline and its consequences. Just as a good shepherd will go after a sheep that has wandered from the flock,⁷ so will the pastors and members of this church seek to restore a wandering member to the Lord through biblical discipline. Therefore, church discipline may be instituted or continued either before or after a member seeks to withdraw from membership in the church.

Removed Member Participation in Other Churches

If a person leaves the church when he or she is in the midst of the disciplinary process or has been removed from the membership of the church, and if the pastors learn that he or she is attending another church, they may (1) inform the pastors of the other church that the person is currently under church discipline, including the nature of the unrepentant sin leading to discipline, and (2) ask the other church to encourage the former member to repent of his or her sin and to be restored to the Lord and to any people against whom he or she has sinned. Such communications enhance the possibility that a person may finally repent of his or her sin, and, at the same time, serve to warn the other church to be on guard against the harm that the former member might cause to that church body.⁸

Additionally, individuals who attend Trinity Grace Church and who have been excluded from fellowship from another church will not be allowed to participate in fellowship at or be members of Trinity Grace Church unless: (1) they repent of their sins and make confession and restitution with their former church; or (2) the pastors of Trinity Grace Church are able to determine that the former church did not apply church discipline according to Scripture.

⁷ See Matthew 18:12-14; Ezekiel 34:4, 8, 16.

⁸ See Matthew 18:12-14; Romans 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-14; 2 Timothy 1:15; 2:16-18; 4:9, 14-15; 3 John 9-10.