

Biblical Restoration – *the grace of biblically restoring those who fall*

Introduction:

Church Restoration (known widely as church discipline) is one of the primary means God uses to correct and restore His children when they fall into sin. It is not meant for retribution, revenge or retaliation; but for repentance, reconciliation and restoration. It is also one-way in which unity, purity, integrity, and godly reputation is maintained in the church. Though we may approach others in private or public instruction, by admonishment, counsel, or rebuke, and in some cases exclusion from membership, God is the One who chastens or disciplines His disobedient children, not us, as a sign that they are truly His (Heb. 12:3-13). However, Christ Himself designed the church to be heaven's instrument in carrying out this grace-filled process of restoration and repentance (Matthew 18:15-20; Galatians 6:1-4).

The purpose of this statement is to define, in general terms, five classes of sinful behavior for which church restoration may be necessary, and to explain how the Bible instructs us to respond to each one. We must not assume, however, that every situation will fall neatly into a single category. Transgressions are often confusing combinations or variations of these general classes, making the proper course of action difficult to determine. For this reason, the church and its leaders must carry out this process of restoration clothed in humility, motivated by love, bathed in prayer, being led solely by the diligent application of Scripture, and utter reliance upon the Spirit of God for discernment and grace.

May any circumstance we face regarding Church Restoration be done to God's glory and for the good of His people.

1. Minor Faults

Minor faults are attitudes and actions such as rudeness, impatience, grumbling, complaining, negativity, pettiness, boasting, irritability, speaking too much or when inappropriate, lack of trust, worry, timidity, selfishness, etc. They are minor sins by comparison, but are nevertheless contrary to biblical instructions to be considerate, patient, content, always thankful, always rejoicing, forbearing, humble, slow to anger, slow to speak, trusting, bold, selfless, etc.

We are permitted, and actually encouraged to overlook most minor faults rather than resorting to correction (Proverbs 10:12; 19:11; Romans 15:1; 1 Peter 4:8). Should a minor fault be thought serious enough to require private counsel, we should be particularly careful to apply Christ's words about removing the "speck" from our brother's eye while a "plank" is in our own (Matthew 7:1-5). Only if a minor fault is repeated so consistently or in such a disruptive manner that it causes harm to the church should any measure(s) be taken beyond private instruction, warning, or rebuke.

2. Unverifiable Sins

Whether minor or serious, unverifiable sins are offenses that are known to only one member besides the offender(s). Additionally, they are matters in which no evidence could be brought forth as proof. For example: insulting words spoken in private, physical assault or theft where no physical or circumstantial evidence exists, breach of a private verbal contract, private awareness of another member's illicit behavior, etc.

In such cases, it may be necessary for the offended person or lone witness to rebuke the offender privately. But if private rebuke is unsuccessful and the offender is not willing to admit his sin to others,

no further church action may be taken. The matter must be left with God; it should not be revealed to anyone else (Matthew 18:16, cf. Deuteronomy 19:15; Proverbs 25:8-10).

(Note: Possible exceptions to this rule include the reporting of criminal offenses to the proper authorities (beginning with the Elders) when necessary or required by law, and/or warning any individuals who are endangered by the offender. Even in these cases, however, unnecessary publicity among church members should be avoided.)

3. Personal Offenses

Personal offenses are offenses between two Christians – more specifically, two members of the same church. Personal offenses could be defined as: “any sinful behavior by one member that causes harm to another member.” For example: insults, slander, breach of personal trust or contract, physical or sexual abuse, adultery, physical assault, theft, vandalism, etc. In these situations, the offended person must closely follow Matthew 18:15-17:

He must first meet with the offender in private, explain his offense to him, and seek his repentance (Matthew 18:15).

- a. If the offender remains unrepentant, the offended person must be cautious before taking additional measures. If the offense is unverifiable (as defined above) or not significant enough to bring before the whole church, it should not be pursued further.
- b. If the offense is significant and verifiable, a meeting should be arranged (as described in 1 Corinthians 6:1-8), during which the offended person can present his case to the offender in the presence of one or two other members (Matthew 18:16). These should either be witnesses to the offense, or mature, discerning members, who are able to evaluate evidence and testimony, question both parties effectively, determine guilt or responsibility, and offer appropriate biblical counsel.
- c. If the offender remains unrepentant even after his guilt has been proven before witnesses, the matter must be told to the general membership of the church at another meeting (Matthew 18:17). If the offender is present, the Elder(s) should rebuke him publicly and implore him to confess and repent. If he is absent, the matter should still be revealed to the church (in appropriately limited detail, of course). In either case, the members of the church should be encouraged to make personal efforts to persuade him to repent. A date should be set for a final meeting, during which the matter will be brought to conclusion. The offender must be notified regarding this meeting (either in person or via certified mail) and encouraged to attend in the hope that he will make a public confession. (Note: Because the offender’s guilt was established by the Elders previously, no opportunity will ordinarily be given at these subsequent meetings for him to debate the matter or defend himself publicly unless he is repentant.)
- d. At the final meeting, the offender (if present) will be offered a final opportunity to repent and be restored. Regarding a publicly known offense, repentance would begin with a public confession. If he remains unrepentant or is not present, he must be treated as an unbeliever and excluded from membership (Matthew 18:17).
- e. Even if the offender repents at some point prior to expulsion from membership, restitution and/or other remedial actions may be necessary, as determined by the Elders (i.e. mandated accountability, removal from church office, counseling, etc.).

4. Public Disobedience

Public disobedience describes sinful behavior that causes harm to the unity, doctrinal integrity, purity, or reputation of the church as a whole. This category would include factiousness, false teaching, divisiveness, contentions, gossip, slander of the church or its leaders, insubordination, sexual immorality, drunkenness, covetousness, theft, dishonesty, outbursts of anger or fighting, foul language, willful failure to provide, wrongful divorce or remarriage, breach of public trust or contract, etc. The goals of church restoration in these situations are two:

- a. to protect and preserve the unity, doctrinal integrity, purity, and reputation of the church (Acts 20:28-31; Hebrews 12:14-16)
- b. to identify those who begin to commit these types of sins, employ various biblical measures to call them to repentance, and labor for their restoration (Galatians 6:1; James 5:19-20).

Unlike the singularity and clarity of the instructions for resolving personal offenses (Matthew 18:15-17), the instructions for dealing with acts of public disobedience are much more varied. Especially here, we must pause, pray, seek wise counsel, and apply the Scriptures carefully, considering each situation to be unique.

The following is a general representation of the range of biblical measures we have been given to deal with public disobedience. Not every measure listed here will be appropriate for every situation. We have listed them in order of severity, from the most gentle or subtle to the most direct, but this should not be construed to mean that they must be applied in this order in every case.

- a. **Be watchful.** Be on guard against offenses (Acts 20:28-31; Hebrews 12:14-16; etc.). We should not aggressively hunt for offenses or opportunities to enact restoration (Matthew 13:28-30), but we must be attentive, ready to address sinful behavior when it becomes known.
- b. **Note those who are offending and watch them closely** (Romans 16:17; 2 Timothy 3:1-5; 4:14-15). This is particularly the responsibility of the Elders who are the shepherds of the flock. We are warned in the New Testament that there will be some who profess to be Christians who will seek to harm the church (Acts 20:30; 2 Peter 2:1-3). A person who begins to teach contrary to sound doctrine, is divisive or insubordinate, or seeks to exalt himself (i.e. 3 John 9-10), may be a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” and must be watched carefully in order to protect the true sheep.
- c. **Correct through teaching** (2 Timothy 2:24-26; Titus 1:9). The Word of God is powerful and effective. In all cases, especially when more direct or severe measures are not immediately necessary, Elders and other teachers must address disobedience by applying the Scriptures humbly, gently, patiently, and convincingly (also see 2 Timothy 3:16-4:2).
- d. **Plead with the offender(s)** (1 Corinthians 1:10-11; Philippians 4:2-3). Paul pleaded with the Corinthian church as a group, and with Euodia and Syntyche as individual Christians in Philippi, imploring them to stop being divisive or contentious. In both situations, his pleas, which were in the form of open letters to the churches, also served as gentle public rebukes.
- e. **Rebuke them** (Galatians 2:11-14; 1 Timothy 5:20; Titus 1:13; 2:15). The prospect of being publicly rebuked should be a powerful deterrent to sinful behavior, both for the one rebuked, and for others who witness the rebuke. Public rebuke also serves the purpose of public teaching by identifying and exposing the nature of the error (Ephesians 5:8-13).

f. **Silence them** (Titus 1:10-11; 3:9-10). Paul insisted that false teachers and divisive people “must be silenced,” and his implication was that the leaders of the church should make every effort to silence them. This must be accomplished through private warning, public exposure of error, and removal from membership.

5. Insufferable Wickedness

Insufferable wickedness refers to situations where there is only one proper course of action – exclusion from fellowship with the church. There are two types of offenders whose behavior should be considered insufferable, and who must be excommunicated:

- a. Gross offenders – those who commit even a single sin that is so abhorrent, shameful, or notorious that the reputation of Christ and the church is imperiled if they are not immediately put out from the church (1 Corinthians 5:1, 5, 13).
- b. Offenders who are known by their wickedness – professing Christians who are known publicly for such sins as heresy, apostasy, divisiveness, sexual immorality, drunkenness, covetousness, etc. Their sinful lifestyle makes them indistinguishable from unbelievers. In other words, they are so characterized by false beliefs, false teaching, destructive motives, worldly affections, or immoral living that they cannot, by definition, be considered Christians (1 Corinthians 5:11-13; 6:9-10; Galatians 5:19-21; Titus 1:16; 1 John 1:5-6; 2:3-4; 3:9-10; 2 John 9-11).

In these situations, all that is necessary before expulsion is the establishment of the facts. We must notice that in 1 Corinthians chapter 5, Paul did not instruct the church to first warn the incestuous man or seek his repentance. No command was given to rebuke him, publicly or privately, before casting him out. With the man’s gross immorality well-known to all, Paul told them to immediately expel him from the church

(1 Corinthians 5:5,13). In verse 11 of the same chapter, Paul lists other types of offenders who must be treated in the same way (also see 1 Timothy 1:20 and Titus 3:10-11).

Additional Considerations

1. The desired result of church restoration is always repentance and the restoration of the offender. Our private and public restoration measures should always be undertaken in a spirit of love, gentleness, and humility as we seek to bring about this grace of restoration (Galatians 6:1-2). When restoration does not occur, then the process of repentance in Matthew 18:15-20 must be followed to see the purity of the church and the testimony of the gospel upheld. But we should be grieved, individually and corporately, that one with whom we shared fellowship now due to unrepentance, must be treated as an unbeliever.
2. Genuine repentance consists of godly sorrow that leads to repentance – which is God’s gift to the sinner (2 Corinthians 7:9-11). It becomes evident when the offender is willing not only to leave his sin, but also to confess it to all who are affected by it (even to the general membership of the church if necessary, as determined by the Elders), and to make restitution when appropriate.
3. When a member is excommunicated, he or she may not attend any gathering of the church, unless it is with the permission of the Elders for the purpose of the restoration and repentance before the body of Christ. Members must not have any continuing association that might be construed as Christian fellowship (2 Corinthians 6:14-17; Ephesians 5:11). The manner

of such association must also never imply approval of the offender's behavior and/or condemnation of the restorative action taken by the church (Proverbs 17:15).

4. In the case of a member who was excluded, restoration will be considered with great caution, and then only after the membership process is repeated in its entirety. Depending upon the nature of the offense, a restored member may have become disqualified for biblical offices within the church (i.e. elder or deacon) due to a tarnished reputation, issues regarding marriage and divorce, and/or an obvious weakness in a particular area (1 Timothy 3:2-3,7,10; Titus 1:6-8; 1 Peter 5:3).

5. Restoration matters should be addressed promptly upon discovery of the sin. Unnecessary delay is unprofitable since it permits the perpetuation of the sin, maintains an unhealthy tension within the church, and creates the perception of apathy regarding sinful behavior.

6. If an offending member leaves our church after initial restorative action begins, but prior to exclusion from membership, the matter will still be brought to conclusion (meaning, formal expulsion will still occur as if the member were present). If we learn that a recently expelled member (or one who is fleeing restorative action) is seeking membership with another church, one of our Elders will, in most cases, attempt to arrange a private meeting with a pastor of that church along with the offender, in order to discuss the ongoing offense and protect the other church from harm (2 Timothy 4:14-15).

7. Where two members disagree regarding blame or degrees of responsibility, the matter should be brought before the Elders and/or other mature men in the church who will judge according to the pattern found in 1 Corinthians 6:1-8.

8. Every member must agree that he or she will never initiate, pursue, or participate in any civil legal action against the church or against any member in connection with a disciplinary matter (see The Fellowship of the Spirit). In fact, any Christian considering civil legal action against another Christian for any reason should consider Paul's prohibition of such behavior (1 Corinthians 6:1-8).

9. Members who persistently and willfully exhibit a pattern of non-attendance are committing a sin requiring church restoration (Hebrews 10:24-25). Except where persistent non-attendance is the result of unavoidable circumstances (e.g. extended illness, incapacitation, out-of-town college education, military service, etc.), it will be considered a congregational offense and addressed appropriately. Those who persist in their non-attendance without legitimate excuse, even after exhortations and warnings from the church, will be expelled from membership. (Note: We have established no specific length of time to designate non-attendance as "persistent." Each situation will be treated as unique. Also, we will be diligent in conducting the most thorough and comprehensive investigation possible in determining the reason(s) for non-attendance. We will assume, until conclusive proof to the contrary exists, that the reason(s) are legitimate. Only when we are certain that the offender is willfully and sinfully neglecting the church will he be sought for restoration and/or be excluded.)

10. The training and discipline of children is the responsibility and biblical obligation of parents, particularly fathers (Proverbs 13:24; 19:18; 23:13-14; Ephesians 6:4). Member-parents who refuse or neglect to properly train and discipline a child, resulting in the perpetuation of sinful behavior on the part of the child, are committing a congregational offense and are subject to church restoration. This is not meant to refer to parents who do properly, diligently, and biblically train and discipline a particularly obstinate child who nevertheless remains rebellious

and disobedient. Even in these rare cases, however, if his or her behavior is so disruptive, immoral, and/or violent that the meetings of the church cannot proceed in a safe, peaceful, and orderly manner, he or she will be excluded from attendance.

Restoring Sinning Elders

Paul's words in 1 Timothy 5:19, "Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses", should not be construed to mean that Elders are to be protected from proper restorative action. Paul knew that Elders, being in a position of authority, could easily become the objects of false or frivolous accusations. His command is simply a warning to watch for such abuses. Elders are church members just as all others, and are subject to discipline according to the same biblical principles as previously stated.

Listen to Paul's stern and reverent words concerning an unrepentant sinning Elder: "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." (1 Tim. 5:19-21)

The removal of an elder from his position due to an evident lack of unrepentant sin or not continually meeting the biblical qualifications as stated in 1 Tim. 3:1-9; and Titus 1:4-9, must be done without partiality and under the weight of heavenly charge. Sinning Elders need to be rebuked in the presence of all, so that the church body will honor the Lord out of reverence and godly fear.

Sinlessness is not the standard here; but faithfulness is. When an Elder persists in sin through abject immorality, love of money, failure to shepherd his family and the church, etc. there will be consequences. As James says, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1). The biblical standard for a pastor is not more of a holy mark than it is for anyone else within the church. But the standard must be adhered to with daily sobriety of spirit and steadfastness of character to both godly living and fidelity of doctrine.

If an unrepentant sinning Elder is removed from office and seeks to find membership at another church or engage himself in ministry in another congregation, it is obligatory upon the Elders, to sit with the leadership of that church and make them aware of the sins the removed Elder is currently under discipline for, so that they may minister accordingly to him seeking his repentance and restoration.

Final Thoughts on Church Restoration and Repentance

There is admittedly a certain tension between the different principles involved in church restoration. On the one hand, there is the gentleness of Galatians 6:1 for the believer, and on the other, the severity of Titus 3:9-11 for the heretic or false teacher. While we may never be judgmental or self-righteous in our attitudes (Matthew 7:1), we must nevertheless judge rightly among ourselves (1 Corinthians 5:12). Just as we are called to love in a manner that is willing to overlook certain sins (1 Peter 4:8), we must also "exhort one another daily" so that none will be "hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" (Hebrews 3:13). The tension is seen most clearly in that we are to love our brother as Christ loved us (John 13:34-35), yet remain willing to treat him as an unbeliever and excommunicate him if he continues in sin (Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 5:11).

We might be tempted to use the word "balance" in describing our desire to manage this tension. But as it is all-too-commonly understood, "balance" means compromise – easing away from convictions and obligations in order not to appear unbalanced or overly zealous. The problem with this understanding is

that Scripture never tells Christians to be “balanced” people in this way. On the contrary, we are told to be zealous and fervent, both in our love for one another (Colossians 3:14; 1 Peter 4:8), and in our pursuit of holiness and purity (Titus 2:14; Hebrews 12:14-17).

What this means for the church in the area of discipline is that we must never rely upon human understanding, which is prone to setting itself against the Word of God. It means we must trust, study, and obey the Scriptures, even when the perceived tension between biblical obligations seems unbearable. We must hold both goals of church restoration in the highest regard, always allowing the Word of God to determine our course of action.

Key Passages of Scripture on Church Restoration

Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. -Hebrews 12:14-16

Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. - Matthew 18:15-17

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles – that a man has his father’s wife. And you are puffed up and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. ...deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.... Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven... I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner – not even to eat with such a person.... For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore ‘put away from yourselves the evil person.’-1 Corinthians 5:1,2,5-7,11-13

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. -Galatians 6:1-2

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. - James 5:19-20

Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly... -1 Thessalonians 5:14

But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us. ...And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. -2 Thessalonians 3:6,14-15

Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear. -1 Timothy 5:20

Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed. -Proverbs 27:5

Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned. -Titus 3:10-11

Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. -Romans 16:17

Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God... If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds. -2 John 9-11

Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner... For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all these things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter. -2 Corinthians 7:9-11