

COMMITMENT TO ACCOUNTABILITY AND CHURCH DISCIPLINE

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24).

A. Accountability and Discipline Are Signs of God's Love

God has established the church to reflect His character, wisdom, and glory in the midst of a fallen world (Eph. 3:10-11). He loves His church so much that He sent His Son to die for her as Christ's bride, and is continually working to purify the church and bring her to maturity (Eph. 5:25-27, Rev. 19:7).

This does not mean that God expects the church to be made up of perfectly pure people. He knows that the best of churches are still companies of sinners who wrestle daily with remaining sin (1 John 1:8; Phil. 3:12). So it helps us to confess our common struggle with sin and our mutual need for God's mercy and grace. We also can spur one another toward maturity by encouraging and holding each other accountable to love, seek after, and obey God with all of our hearts, souls, minds and strength, and to love others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:30-31; Heb. 10:24-25).

The Bible sometimes refers to this process of mutual encouragement and accountability as "discipline." The Bible never presents church discipline as being negative, legalistic, or harsh, as modern society often does. True discipline originates from God Himself and is always presented as a sign of genuine love. "The Lord disciplines those He loves" (Heb. 12:6). "Blessed is the man You discipline, O LORD, the man You teach from Your law" (Ps. 94:12). "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline" (Rev. 3:19).

God's discipline in the church, like the discipline in a God-honoring family, is intended to be primarily positive, instructive, and encouraging. This process, sometimes called "formative discipline," involves preaching, teaching, prayer, personal Bible study, small group fellowship, and countless other enjoyable activities that challenge and encourage us to love and serve God more wholeheartedly.

God's discipline, as in a family with growing children, may also have a corrective purpose. When we forget or disobey what God has taught us, He corrects us. One way He does this is to call the church to seek after us and lead us back to the path of godliness. This process, which is sometimes called "corrective" or "restorative" discipline, is likened in Scripture to a shepherd seeking after a lost sheep.

If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off (Matt. 18:12-13).

Thus, restorative or corrective discipline is always to be administered in humility and love, with the goal of restoring someone to a close walk with Christ (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1), protecting others from harm (1 Cor. 5:6), and showing respect for the honor and glory of God (1 Pet. 2:12).

Biblical discipline is similar to the discipline we value in other aspects of life. We admire parents who consistently teach their children how to behave properly and who lovingly discipline them when they disobey. We value music teachers who attempt to bring out the best in their students by teaching them proper technique and consistently pointing out their errors so that they can play a piece properly. We applaud athletic coaches who diligently teach their players to do what is right and correct them when they err so that the team works well together and can compete for the championship.

The same principles apply to the family of God. We, too, need to be taught what is right and to be lovingly corrected when we do something contrary to what God teaches us in His Word. Therefore, we as a church are committed to helping one another obey God's command to be "self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined" (Titus 1:8).

B. Most Corrective Discipline Is Private, Personal, and Informal

God gives every believer grace to be self-disciplined. "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7). Thus discipline always begins as a personal matter and usually remains that way, as each of us studies God's Word, seeks Him in prayer, and draws on His grace to change and grow in godliness.

But sometimes we are blind to our sins or so tangled in them that we cannot get free on our own. "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another

day after day, as long as it is *still* called 'Today,' so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:12-13). This is why the Bible says, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (Gal. 6:1). In obedience to this command, we are committed to giving and receiving loving correction within Calvary Memorial Church whenever a sin (whether in word, behavior or doctrine) seems too serious to overlook (Prov. 19:11).

If repeated private conversations do not lead another person to repentance, Jesus commands that we ask other brothers or sisters to get involved. "If he will not listen, take one or two others along" (Matt. 18:16). If informal conversations with these people fail to resolve the matter, then we may seek the involvement of more influential people, such as a small group leader, Sunday school teacher or church leader. If even these efforts fail to bring a brother or sister to repentance, and if the issue is too serious to overlook, we will move into what may be called "formal discipline."

C. Formal Discipline May Involve the Entire Church

If an individual persistently refuses to listen to personal and informal correction to turn from speech or behavior that the Bible defines as sin, Jesus commands us to "tell it to the church" (Matt. 18:17a). This first involves informing one or more church leaders about the situation. If the offense is not likely to cause imminent harm to others, our leaders may approach the individual privately to personally establish the facts and encourage repentance of any sin they discover. The individual will be given every reasonable opportunity to explain and defend his or her actions. If the individual recognizes his or her sin and repents, the matter usually ends there, unless a confession to additional people is needed.

If an offense is likely to harm others or lead them into sin, or cause division or disruption, our leaders may accelerate the entire disciplinary process and move promptly to protect the church (Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; Titus 3:10-11).

As the disciplinary process progresses, leaders may impose a variety of sanctions to encourage repentance, including but not limited to private and public admonition, withholding the Lord's Supper, removing from office, withdrawing of normal fellowship, and, as a last resort, removing from membership and church attendance (Matt. 5:23-24; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; Matt. 18:17).

If the straying individual does not repent in response to private appeals from leaders, they may inform others in the church who may be able to influence that individual or be willing to pray for him or her, or people who might be harmed or affected by that person's behavior. This step may include close friends, a small group, a Sunday school class, or the entire congregation if leaders deem it to be appropriate (Matt. 18:17; 1 Tim. 5:20).

If, after a reasonable period of time, the individual still refuses to change, then leaders may formally remove him or her from membership and normal fellowship. They also may inform the church body of their decision and instruct the congregation to treat the individual as an unbeliever. This means that we will no longer treat him or her as a fellow Christian. Instead of having casual, relaxed fellowship with the individual, we will look for opportunities to lovingly bring the gospel to them, remind them of God's holiness and mercy, and call them to repent and put their faith in Christ (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20).

We realize that our natural human response to correction is often to hide or run away from accountability (Gen. 3:8-10). To avoid falling into this age-old trap and to strengthen Calvary Memorial Church's ability to rescue us if we are caught in sin, we agree not to run away from this church to avoid corrective discipline. Therefore, we waive our right to withdraw from membership or accountability if discipline is in process. Although we are free to stop attending the church at any time, we agree that a withdrawal while discipline is pending will not be made effective until the church has fulfilled its God-given responsibilities to encourage our repentance and restoration, and to bring the disciplinary process to an orderly conclusion, as described in these Commitments (Matt. 18:12-14; Gal. 6:1; Heb. 13:17).

If an individual leaves the church while discipline is in effect or is being considered, and leaders learn that he or she is attending another church, they may inform that church of the situation and ask its leaders to encourage the individual to repent and be reconciled to the Lord and to any people he or she has offended. This action is intended both to help the individual find freedom from their sin and to warn the other church about the harm that he or she might do to their members (see Matt. 18:12-14; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 3 John 1:9-10).

Loving restoration always stands at the heart of the disciplinary process. If an individual repents, and leaders confirm his or her sincerity, we will rejoice together and gladly imitate God's forgiveness by restoring the person to fellowship within the body (see Matt. 18:13; Luke 15:3-7, 11-32; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; Col. 3:12-14).

Where known, people who have been excluded from another church because of church discipline issues will not be allowed to partake of the ordinances, become members, or participate in the regular fellowship of Calvary Memorial Church, until they have repented of their sins and made a reasonable effort to be reconciled, **or** until such time as our leaders have determined that the discipline of the former church was not biblically appropriate.