

Policy on Church Discipline
Trinity Presbyterian Church
Adopted:

Introduction: The purpose of this policy is to cite and amplify, where necessary, the appropriate policy guidelines for conducting church discipline in the Trinity Presbyterian Church.

THE BOOK OF CHURCH ORDER (BCO) 27-5 outlines the proper principles for the exercise of church discipline and establishes the following steps in conducting Church discipline:

- a) Instruction in the Word;
- b) An individual's responsibility to admonish one another (Matthew 18:15; Gal. 6:1).
- c) If the admonition is rejected, then the calling of one or more witnesses (Matthew 18:16);
- d) If rejection persists, then the church must act through her court unto admonition, suspension, excommunication and deposition.

BCO APPENDIX I addresses the first three steps, (a) through (c), by providing an expanded discussion of the implications raised by Scripture for a complete conflict resolution process at each step. Step (d), formal church discipline, is addressed by Part II of the Book of Church Order, The Rules of Discipline. However, the BCO does not provide expanded discussion relating to the participation of the congregation for step (d).

The following expanded discussion is provided as background for establishing general guidelines in cases where steps (a) – (c) above have failed to lead an offender to repentance¹:

To “tell it to the church” is not to be done by a brother standing up in the middle of a worship service in which there is a mixture of believers and unbelievers and declaring what has happened. That would violate the principles of good order set forth in 1 Corinthians 14, and it would also violate the command to tell it to the *church*. At this point, the world has no right to know about the matter. The church alone must hear.

Thus one must tell the church either at a closed meeting of its membership duly called by the elders in a decent and orderly manner for that purpose, or by telling the elders as representatives of the church. This is probably the meaning of “tell it to the church” i.e. tell it to the church by telling it to the elders.²

When the elders tell the congregation, they must be sure that only members are informed of the situation. This could be done at a closed meeting of the congregation or it could be done by letter, telling each member to read and destroy the letter when he has finished reading it so that it may never fall into the hands of nonmembers. In any letter or meeting informing the congregation that a brother has refused to deal with his sin and be reconciled, clear instructions must be given not only about how to treat him while under

¹ The content of this discussion is based on and often quoted directly from *Handbook of Church Discipline* by Jay E. Adams.

² Dr. Adams explains this conclusion with lengthy discussion filled with biblical citations from the Old Testament (pg. 69).

discipline, but about the fact that this is privileged information, belonging to the members of the congregation alone.³

The reason why the congregation is told is so that as a whole they may have an opportunity to help the offending, willful brother or sister come to repentance.

What should the congregation be told about their duties to the brother or sister who is undergoing official church discipline? Basically, in the Scriptures they are told three things:

1. That brother or sister so-and-so is under discipline for a particular problem.⁴
The congregation does not need to be told the details of the offense, but it would seem that they must be told the nature of the problem if they are to confront and seek to counsel him in a meaningful way. Paul mentions the offense in 2 Thessalonians. The rule here is to say as little as necessary, but enough to enable the body to do its job.
2. The congregation may no longer fellowship with him as though nothing were wrong.
They are told, “Don’t mix, or mingle, with him” (2 Thessalonians 3:14; 1 Corinthians 5:9, 11), “withdraw from him” (2 Thessalonians 3:6), and “don’t eat” with him (1 Corinthians 5:11). All these commands say one and the same thing: the congregation must not regard the so-called brother (1 Corinthians 5:11) “as a brother” (2 Thessalonians 3:15), but as one whose status is in question. (There is some doubt about whether he is a real brother, because he fails to heed the admonition of the brethren and the authority of Christ exercised by His officers in the church; by the time the congregation begins its task, he has gone very far in his willful disobedience and contumacy.). “Not to eat” means two things: (1) that normal fellowship is broken and (2) that the offender is forbidden to partake of the Lord’s Supper because, according to 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, partaking is “communion” or fellowship. If he refuses to heed the officers and their admonitions, Paul says that he must be removed from table fellowship and all other forms of normal fellowship in order to “shame” him into repentance (2 Thessalonians 3:14).
3. They must “counsel” him (2 Thessalonians 3:15; Gal 6:1-2).
In the final step of church discipline, we take an even greater leap. All steps prior to the present one were taken within the kingdom of God; now we move from the kingdom of light to the kingdom of darkness. While it is true that disfellowship (the term *excommunicate*) began when the congregation was informed, the New Testament uses other terms and expressions to describe the dismissal of a member from the care and discipline of the church. The way the New Testament puts it is:
 - Remove him from your midst (1 Corinthians 5:2).
 - Clean out the leaven (1 Corinthians 5:7).

³ Dr. Adams also makes a case for the elders attempting to help the offender before turning it over to the entire congregation for admonishment (pg. 70).

⁴ This is essential if they are to obey Paul’s command to “mark” (i.e. identify him to the entire congregation) the person (2 Thessalonians 3:14).

- Get him out of your midst (1 Corinthians 5:13).
- Deliver this person to Satan (1 Corinthians 5:5).
- I have handed them over to Satan (1 Timothy 1:20).
- Treat him as a heathen and a tax collector (Matthew 18:17).

These are the ways in which the New Testament describes the actions that terminate one's membership in the visible, organized church. Three actions can be found in these expressions: (1) removing, cleaning, or getting him out of the midst; (2) handing him over to Satan; and (3) treating him as a heathen – each of which emphasizes a distinct fact about his termination. The first shows the imperative for getting him out of the church (there the emphasis is on the welfare of the congregation and the honor of God's name). Though some may think that he should not be allowed to attend the worship services of the church, that is a wrong reading of the passage. What Paul means is that he is removed from the care and discipline of the church. The second speaks of concern for the one who is removed; he is to be handed over to Satan to be “taught” and “for the destruction of the flesh so that the spirit may be saved.” The third speaks of the manner in which the members of the church are to treat him – the same way they treat unbelievers.

One never should be removed from the church with the “good riddance” attitude. Rather we should adopt the same attitude as the father who mourned for the Prodigal Son and longed for his return, scanning the horizon and running to him at first sight. It should be a solemn time of conscience-searching, mourning, and prayer when someone is removed from the care and discipline of the church.⁵

In summary, if the private means of church discipline have been fully utilized and the sinner refuses to listen, the following steps are to be followed:

1. Tell it to the church, by first taking it to the elders of the church. If the session believes the charge is valid, it should bring the case to trial in accordance with BCO.
2. If the offender is convicted, the elders will admonish the sinner, warn him of the dangers of his refusal to repent (contumacy), and attempt to restore him. If he refuses, the elders will suspend normal and table fellowship in accordance with BCO.
3. The elders will inform and instruct the congregation (members only) as specified above by closed congregational meeting or letter.
4. A waiting period, normally three weeks, will be specified for the congregation to pray for, confront, admonish, persuade, and lead the sinner to repentance.
5. If the sinner continues to refuse the call to repentance, the elders will officially terminate his membership, removing him from the privilege and protection of the church.⁶
6. The congregation will be informed of final termination, instructed on how to treat an unbeliever, and exhorted to mourn and pray for him and the church.
7. The church will retain detailed records of all of the official discipline proceedings.

Restoring to Fellowship

⁵ Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1974, pp. 67-75, 77, 82-83, 89

⁶ Note: BCO calls this action excommunication.

Restoration of an offender to the membership and fellowship of the church is an occasion for rejoicing. It is important that the repentant brother or sister is welcomed back into the body with full assurance of Christian love. The biblical model for restoration is found in 2 Corinthians 2 especially in verses 6-8. Three factors stand out as essential:

1. The repentant sinner must be forgiven
2. He must be assisted.
3. He must be reinstated in love.

Restoration should be conducted in the same manner as disfellowship and termination (i.e. closed congregational meeting or letter). The congregation should be instructed how to carry out each aspect of restoration. (1) The church must make a formal declaration of forgiveness to the repentant sinner and make it a matter of the church record. The congregation should be instructed that the matter is closed and should not be held against the forgiven offender in any way. This instruction is particularly important if the nature of the sin was grievous and disgusting. Our forgiveness is to be like God's (Ephesians 4:32) complete, holding nothing back. (2) Assistance may be necessary in a variety of ways – counseling, making new social contacts and restoring old ones, finding a place of ministry in the church, financial, medical, etc. The church must look for ways to offer help. (3) Formal reinstatement with all the rights and privileges of full membership should be conferred along with an appropriate celebration. Just as the father's household celebrated the return of the Prodigal Son, we ought to rejoice and renew our love towards a repentant brother or sister. Likewise the congregation should be warned not to respond like the older brother in the parable.⁷

⁷ Ibid. (91-97).