“It is necessary in our hardened and apostate age for the church to be called back to the New Testament doctrine of church discipline. In our day, the church has become tolerant of sin even when it is found in her own people. This warrants the wrath of God upon the church’s indifference to his holiness. The modern church seems more willing to ignore sin than denounce it, and more ready to compromise God’s law than to proclaim it. It is a mournful fact that many churches refuse to take sin seriously. We have no right to dialogue about sin. That was Eve’s mistake. The tempter’s suggestions should have been promptly rebuked; but instead, they were discussed (Gen. 3:1-5). That discussion was compromise and sin. The church cannot stand before her enemies while ignoring sin in her own ranks.” (Daniel Wray, Biblical Church Discipline, 1978)

The preceding quotation was written almost thirty years ago, and the feeling expressed fueled the author to write a book on church discipline. In our church, we have possessed a deep conviction about sin. At the core of our doctrine is the belief that we are sinful human beings, and need God’s grace, along with his guiding hand of discipline, administered through His Word and through other disciples. Prior to our conversion, many of us wandered hopelessly through worldly religion, with little or no idea of how God expected relationships in His church to be carried out. We had the desire, but lacked the knowledge. Even over the last several years, as we have analyzed the limits of our previous discipling paradigm, it has become clear that too often sin is being tolerated, and in many cases sin has been perpetuated in the name of openness and freedom; a freedom never granted us by our Heavenly Father. It has become clear to me that while we still possess the same conviction of “ridding ourselves” of sin, we are too often confused about what it is; we have members who aren’t fully educated in the area of church discipline, and worse yet, have some leaders who have shrunk back from solidly expecting their church to resolve things spiritually. They understand the meaning of Matthew 18, but aren’t really sure how it is to be administered in God’s church. If we don’t address this fully, we run the risk of watching the pendulum swing dangerously toward the traditional church mindset – the very atmosphere that spawned our movement. Listen to the words of Jay Adams, written 17 years ago, and let them sink in. Perhaps they’ll inspire us to more deeply address this issue, and better equip our members for Godly interpersonal relationships:

“As I think of the homes that have been hopelessly broken, the estrangements that have permanently resulted, and the misery that has been unnecessarily caused by the failure of churches to practice church discipline, or to practice it biblically, my heart aches. Even more tragically, as I consider the ruins of many congregations torn by schismatic and factious persons who have been allowed to wreak havoc with Christ’s flock, and the sickness of many others weakened by the infectious toxin of unrepentant sin that circulates in Christ’s body of believers, I am deeply moved. And above all, as I
think of the dishonor that has been heaped upon the name of our Lord because of the tarnished witness of churches that harbor glaring violations of His Holy commandments, I am appalled.” (Handbook of Church Discipline, 1986)

My objective here is to address the following:
1. Fully Define church discipline
2. Discuss the reasons for administering discipline
3. Discuss the proper recipients
4. Exegesis of Matthew 18. How do the various stages work?
5. The divine authority God has granted His church for these purposes.

What is Church Discipline?

Immediately, when we mention this, people can draw a negative conclusion. Although there are many levels to proper church discipline, most people equate the idea to the last two levels in Matt. 18:15-19. In other words, church discipline = being warned or formally removed from the fellowship by leadership. While this is part of the whole church discipline framework, it is grossly inaccurate to make this leap. In fact, because of this, many Christians think of church discipline in a negative, not a positive way. Their thinking may go something like this: church discipline = confrontation = negative = that makes me uncomfortable = I want no part of it = church starts to tolerate sin! You can imagine how Satan can use this to his advantage.

TRUE FACT: Church discipline is the most helpful, positive aspect of our relationships, and if administered correctly, very rarely reaches the formal level. It’s important that we train people to think of it in a positive way. Besides, imagine being in a family where Dad talked often of “family discipline.” If you didn’t understand the real nature of it, or if it were always associated with conflict, you may be lacking in real inspiration!

What is the role of God’s church? Glorify Him on this earth. After we become disciples, we are to be daily transformed into His likeness (Rom. 12:2, 2 Cor. 5:17). We are to become more like him in every way, and always have a long way to go! Considering how badly God wants everyone to be saved, it makes sense that the purpose of our new life individually and collectively, is to glorify Him. His church is to be a place of growing, maturing, and learning His ways.

Consider the following:

Matthew 28:18-20

v. 20 “teaching them to obey…” NT:1321
didasko (did-as'-ko); a prolonged (causative) form of a primary verb dao (to learn); to teach (in the same broad application): KJV - teach.
Look at the meaning of discipline:
Hebrews 12:5-11
v. 6 “the Lord disciplines those he loves…”

The word discipline: NT:3811
paideuo (pahee-dyoo'-o); from NT:3816; to train up a child, i.e. educate, or (by implication) discipline (by punishment):
KJV - chasten (-ise), instruct, learn, teach.

Discipline promotes righteousness, peace, and learning. Lack of discipline brings complete chaos. How much learning can take place in an atmosphere of chaos? Imagine a classroom without peace. Consequently, there would be no order, thus no learning. The job of the school system is NOT to make good kids (the primary role of the parents), but to maintain an atmosphere where learning and progress can take place. Perhaps, if school discipline hadn’t grown so soft and toothless, our kids may be able to learn more!

Interestingly, Paul commended those churches that had an atmosphere of order, structure and decency (righteousness and peace), and strictly warned those that possessed the opposite.

Col. 2:5 – Impressed by how orderly they were!
1 Cor. 1:10-17 – wanted to cut divisions off before they emptied cross of its power
1 Cor. 3:1-4 – They were being worldly, splitting into different groups – he was obviously concerned that order was being compromised.
1 Cor. 14:40 - their worship had become anything but orderly.
2 Cor. 12:20 - disorder is mentioned as a serious sin!
1 Thess 4:12 – what was he concerned about? Brothers living a “disorderly” life.

2 Thess. 3:6, 11

The word idle: NT:814
ataktos (at-ak'-toce); adverb from NT:813, irregularly (morally):
KJV - disorderly.

We need church discipline to promote order, decency, righteousness, and learning…Not to mention living our lives in a manner that glorifies God!

In the broadest sense, healthy church discipline is being absolutely committed to the many “one another” passages in the Bible, and cultivating deep, spiritual relationships in the church. We’ll discuss the various levels defined by scriptures.

Preventative vs. corrective?

It should be obvious that the best type of discipline is preventative. The idea that we are committed to the healthy church discipline mentioned above (a deep commitment to “one-another” involvement in each others’ lives) means that there will be less of a need
for corrective, or formal discipline. When you maintain your car properly, you don’t have many big, corrective maintenance bills. When we teach our people the correct way to handle situations that come up, we’ll find the same thing at work. As a minister, I’ve come to grips with the fact that there will still be “big breakdowns” at times. There will be challenges and problems. God’s visible church is a model of His perfection, its people are human and fall short of it. The one thing we can control in this situation is how we deal with sin and the problems that arise from it. As imperfect as we are, we still have to do our best to maintain order in His church – and to do it His way!

One important note: I firmly believe that for the most part, our members don’t have a tough time recognizing sin, or even distinguishing what’s wrong in a “fuzzy” situation. In the same way, I’m positive they understand the broad concept of Matthew 18. In fact, one of our strengths is that we, more than any other movement, have been trained to call sin what it is: SIN! Many of us have come out of movements and churches where sin was compromised, rationalized, and intellectualized. However, I’m also convinced that they still don’t understand how to fully carry it out (they need us to educate them more specifically), and worse, too many people still rely on the full-time staff or formal lay leadership to carry it out. In other words, they are not taking hold of the responsibility they have to the scriptures. Proper church discipline serves two functions: First, it promotes and maintains an environment of peace, order and decency, in which learning can take place. Second, it serves to root out all hindrances to that condition of learning. Therefore, it is up to every church member to put these concepts into practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for administering church discipline</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <strong>To glorify God by obedience to His instructions for maintaining proper church unity.</strong></td>
<td>John 17, Matthew 18:15-19, Rom. 16:17, 1 Cor. 5:1-ff, 1 Thess. 5:14, 2 Thess. 3:6-15, 1 Tim. 5:20, 6:3-5, Titus 1:13, 2:15, 3:10, Rev. 2:2, 14-15, 20.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. <strong>Maintain the purity of the church and worship.</strong></td>
<td>1 Cor. 5:6-8, Col. 1:28-29, Eph. 3:10</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. <strong>Avoid profaning the cross by not dealing with sin appropriately.</strong></td>
<td>1 Cor. 11:27-32</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. <strong>To uphold the integrity of Christ by taking righteousness seriously.</strong></td>
<td>2 Cor. 2:17</td>
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Adherence to God’s Word and His standard of righteousness brings Him glory.

We’re fallible, not perfect, but we must strive to present the church perfect before God. The purity of His church should concern us greatly, since sin and false doctrine are extremely infectious.

3. **Avoid profaning the cross by not dealing with sin appropriately.**
   1 Cor. 11:27-32

4. **To uphold the integrity of Christ by taking righteousness seriously.**
   2 Cor. 2:17
Think of the degradation of Christianity in the world’s eye due to laxity in standards. How sad it is that holding an important church office brings less respect these days, and more snickering. We need to think about how the world views us, and try hard to approach God’s Word with sincerity and earnestness.

5. **To deter others from sin!**
   
   1 Tim. 5:20

   If we get into the habit of dealing with sin in the church appropriately, sensitively, many will simply stop sinning! Showing conviction and resolve has an inoculating effect in the fellowship, especially in the area of gossip and slander. Consider the example in Acts 5:1-11. In that case, God himself carried out discipline, and one clear result was that “Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.” This had to be a healthy fear and respect for the holiness of God.

6. **To prevent giving God a reason to set himself up against our church.**
   
   Rev. 2:14-25

   God has shown that while he is pleased with success and sacrifice, he won’t contend long with unrighteousness! Either His people change their ways, or he’ll change the people. It’s hard to argue with God on that one.

7. **To completely restore the offender.**
   
   Gal. 6:1-2, Matt. 18:15, 1 Cor. 5:5, Heb. 3:12-13, 2 Cor. 2:7-8

   Their soul is what matters! Discipline should never be done for personal reasons. “Winning your brother over” is the main objective, NOT “being proved right.” Also, hurt feelings on the part of the offended must subordinate themselves to the ultimate goal of saving a wayward soul. This is absolutely crucial when we deal with interpersonal relationships in the body. Consider the case of a marriage torn apart by sin. If a husband sins against his wife (or the other way around) and family, and ultimately destroys the marriage, church discipline must be carried out appropriately. In the end, we have to remember what the goal is: to restore the offender to faith (Luke 15, Gal. 6:1-2). In this situation, repentance could easily become messy and tricky, and must be handled by wise people in the church (elders where possible), exercising much care and patience. If he repents and changes his ways, then the fellowship must welcome him as God does, forgiving his sin and restoring him to a right standing in the church. For obvious reasons, this would be much easier for the church to handle emotionally than for the offended wife. However, her feelings and perspective must be biblical, and in the end, she would have to realize this, and bring her emotions under the authority of the scripture. Loyalty, friendship, and sentimentality have their place in relationships, but NOT to an extent that overrides scripture!
Who are the proper recipients?

The answer to this question seems to be dynamic. Obviously, many situations are cut and dry, some aren’t so simple to figure out, and need to be carefully thought and patiently prayed about.

Important note: Do we confront every little thing in each others’ lives? The answer is clearly no. Look at the following verses:

Prov. 10:12 – Remember love…treat people as you would like to be treated. Do you appreciate patience? Treat others likewise.
Prov. 19:11 - There is strength in overlooking an offense. Taking everything to task according to the “letter of the law” is anti-relationship and immature, not to mention hypocritical (ever been thankful somebody overlooked something you did?)!

When to “overlook” a sin:
1. Is it dishonoring God? In other words, if I overlook it, will God be ticked off? Consider Jesus’ example with the Pharisees. He drove sin from the temple in John 2, but didn’t walk into the house of every Pharisee and drive it out. He addressed certain people at certain points. However, if somebody’s sin is directly affecting an unbeliever’s view of God and His church, then clearly we can’t overlook it in our brother. Also, it is NOT a sign of strength to overlook sin because you’re a people-pleaser.

2. Is it damaging your relationship? Try a three-day test. If you feel offended because of sin against you, and feel the same way three days later (after praying about it), then you need to go talk with them about it. This is especially true in cases of subtle sin, or sin against you that hurts your feelings, but perhaps was unintentional.

3. Is it hurting others? Appropriate examples of this may be domestic violence, abuse, threats, greed, immorality, hypocrisy, slander, gossip, divisions. It’s important to remember that more churches today are split by the tongue than by any other sin or doctrinal issue! These sins rise to the top of the list in terms of importance.

4. Is it hurting the offender? Are they seriously harming themselves? Appropriate examples may be alcohol, drugs, tobacco. Is it becoming habitual? Are they destroying their life? Is it starting to characterize who they are? Today, a common mantra is “if you’re ticking me off, I’ll tell you, but if you’re only hurting yourself, I’ll leave you alone!” Obviously, this is absurd and unbiblical. It’s important to understand that everyone, at some point will act out in bad way, or have a meltdown. For example, if a person is usually known to be gentle and kind, but has an outburst of anger, it may not need to be confronted. Cutting each other some slack is often very helpful.

That being said, I have tried to identify the likely candidates for the church discipline formula in Matthew 18. The following offers a good guideline:

1. SIN – Those that commit serious private offenses.
2. **Divisive factions** – Those that *directly* or *indirectly* seek to destroy the peace of the church.  
*Rom. 16:17-18, Titus 3:10, Gal. 5:20* (gossip, slander, discontent, disunity). We must be careful with this one today. It’s becoming too easy to talk in ways unbiblical.

3. **Those living “double-lives.”** Anyone clearly living in habitual denial of God’s moral code and standard of conduct.  
*Titus 1:16, 2 Tim. 3:1-5*

It would be great if everyone excelled in being open about their struggles, but in reality there will be those *in the church* that are living completely contrary to God’s Word. Once exposed, it must be dealt with *seriously* and *quickly*. I believe it is right to feel appropriately sad, even convicted when somebody sins badly, or even leaves a relationship with God. However, too often we’ve let this degenerate into a feeling of “total responsibility” for the condition of each others’ faith. I have to sadly admit that in the past, when discovering a person’s sin or bad situation, I’ve asked their discipler questions like: “what happened?” “why didn’t you see this?” “what are you going to do?” While these questions often sound spiritual, they have made us feel overly responsible for the faith of our brother. I’ll go even further, and say that this sort of pressure has contributed to harsh leadership, or getting frustrated with each other. Some (especially Bible Talk Leaders) have even felt worn out, desiring not to serve anymore, feeling that too much weight is on their shoulders to help keep everyone faithful in their group. We simply have to understand where our responsibility begins and ends. I play a big part in helping my brother stay faithful to God, and will do my best to be sure my conscience is clear in regards to his life, but in the end, HE alone is responsible for his salvation, not ME. Even Paul had close friends who left the faith on their own (*2 Tim. 1:15, 4:14*).

4. **Rejecting essential doctrines of the faith.** (*1 Timothy 6:3 “sound instruction”*) This is NOT for people who fail to *understand* all the doctrine in the Bible (who can do that?). However, there does need to be adherence to what we consider “essential.” Some examples:

- legalism (no grace)
- commitment
- sacrifice
- repentance
- lack of wholeheartedness
- habitually missing church or meetings of the body
- refusal to grow in fruits of the Spirit
- not contributing financially
- lack of evangelistic zeal over an unusual period of time
- dating non-Christians

This list is by no means exhaustive. The most applicable example is dealing with people who move here from other congregations. In my opinion, formed after working for eight years in a ministry with an unusually high number of “move-ins,” we need immediate correspondence with the former minister, & need to get involved quickly, as I have found way too many unresolved sin issues in new members.

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Matt. 18:15-19

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A word on weakness vs. uncommitted

Commitment IS an essential doctrine of the Bible, not just our church. A person who is not willing to at least be very committed to the family of God cannot be a candidate for baptism. However, we need to be careful not to confuse committed and weak. The Bible addresses weakness throughout:

Old Testament – continual struggle to define commitment and faithfulness to God
Gospels – we see the weakness and fragility of the human heart and condition
Pauline epistles – frequent discussions concerning weak people, and much instruction about living a devoted life in spite of weakness and struggle

Paul himself even defines his own weaknesses beautifully as the catalyst for helping him see how powerful God is, and how human and fragile he is. He embraces his weakness, and talks of overcoming it through the cross (2 Cor. 12). In fact, we understand that until we make it to heaven, we’ll have weaknesses. They are trials, disappointments, doubts, sin, shallow convictions, worldly attitudes, damaged, troubled, lacking biblical knowledge, hurt, and physically limited. Who of us can say we aren’t weak? Living in a sinful world as sinful people = experiencing weakness!

The question becomes, can a weak person also be committed? Commitment is loyal, consistent, devoted, determined, purposeful, and grounded. You absolutely CAN be weak and committed. A weak and committed person is determined to tackle all of life’s problems by obeying the Bible, and resolving all of life’s issues within the church, not independent of it. An uncommitted person is weak, but also not convicted about their place in the body, and ultimately approaches life’s challenges independent of the church. We have to help people through their problems through good, biblical counseling. We have to create an atmosphere in which it is safe to struggle, be open, and vulnerable, while at the same time expecting people to stay connected to the body. We can help people with their problems, but we cannot loose the commands of commitment GOD gives them in His word.

Matthew 18 Put Into Practice

Self-Discipline
Self-discipline, although not mentioned as step one in the scripture, is inherent in the concept. Jesus was concerned about what to do when one has been sinned against, not about the personal work that goes into every believer as we try to kill the sin in our own lives first. It is our job to learn our sinful nature, and control ourselves. As we grow each day in the Lord, it should follow that our offenses against our brother diminish! Look at self-discipline in:

Galatians 5:23
2 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control.
Self-control  NT:1466  
*egkrateia* (eng-krat'-i-ah); from NT:1468; self-control (especially continence):  
KJV - temperance.

The word is usually translated as self-control, and is the closest to self-discipline. It is a fruit of the Spirit, and important to keep in mind that the **idea of self-discipline is the key to successful church discipline**. If I’m able to control myself, and restrain my desires to sin, I’m less likely to sin against people. Similarly, when I do sin and my brother confronts me, prompting me to change my ways, the situation will only repeat itself if I have not “learned my lesson,” which involves understanding why I sinned, how it played out, and how to control myself in the future. Think of what happens as we discipline our children. We are hoping that they will come to their own convictions, learn from their mistakes, and practice self-discipline in the future. If this happens, they need outside intervention less and less, and they truly mature. This is why it is so important that after somebody has repented and asked forgiveness, they need some follow up and individual discipling. They need to really understand the “why” of their behavior, not just the “what.” I would suggest that this is the crux of “one-another” relationships: helping each other better understand our sinful nature with an eye toward more quickly recognizing it, thus sinning less. We are constantly aware of the need to disciple the heart in our children, not the behavior. This is extremely important in church discipline as well.

**A word about e-mail & texting…**  
E-mail has NO part in the church discipline process! E-mail, texting and the internet have made our lives much easier in so many ways. Unfortunately, it has also made it easier for us to avoid conflict, and weasel out of direct communication. For some reason, timid people become incredibly bold when they can e-mail their thoughts. E-mail is a vehicle for transferring information, not communicating emotions. We have all seen too many emotionally-charged memos. The result is unproductive and hurtful. Things cannot be adequately communicated without face to face interaction. For example, an exclamation point in an e-mail is sometimes the equivalent to shouting in person. Paul did write letters, but only for the sake of expediency in a society and a time devoid of the kind of transportation and communication options we have. He always expressed the desire to come see the recipients of his letters, and you’d have a hard time making the case that the reason for these letters was his deep issues concern conflict avoidance! Enough said here.

**Just between the two of you**  
The very first stage mentioned by Jesus is one brother going to another. **Most** issues can and should be resolved at this level. I feel there are four important things to remember:

1. **Involve only pertinent people.** In other words, if someone has sinned against you, you must do your best to keep the matter between just the two of you. Sometimes, in the name of “venting,” disciples will discuss an offense with a third party before first approaching the offender, often times mentioning names and specifics. This is gossip and slander (especially if what you were feeling turned out **NOT** to be a sin against
you!). If you feel the need to get advice about the situation, try to do so without using specific names.

I believe in many ways our previous discipling paradigm did not encourage the right administration of this scripture. For example, when many people saw sin in their brother or sister, it was common practice to take up the issue with their discipling partner. We inadvertently taught people to avoid taking things directly to each other. This is wrong, not to mention unfair to a friend who didn’t witness the sin, but now has to go confront it. In instances where someone feels they can’t confront the offender, much prayer and advice from spiritual people must be employed. It should be the exception, not the rule.

2. **Pray for wisdom (James 1:5).** Unless there is no doubt about the sin (your brother curses at you during Bible Talk!), there is no harm in going away and praying about it. This gives you a little time (which naturally takes the emotional edge away), and allows God to give you further clarity. Remember Ephesians 4:26 says, “In your anger do not sin…” It is possible to approach Matthew 18 with too much emotion. This is wrong and reckless. Go away and pray, then, when you do approach someone, you’ve thought it through very carefully. Who knows, after going away and giving it some thought, you may just choose to overlook it, or conclude that it wasn’t meant as a personal affront.

3. **Go to your brother with the right attitude!** As mentioned earlier, this should happen with time. However, how we approach somebody makes a world of difference. Don’t lose the issue in “how” you say it. I’ve heard that how your ideas are communicated go a long way in their effectiveness. How are they communicated?
   - 7% - what you say
   - 38% - from your tone
   - 55% - from your body language!

4. **Put these principles into action in a timely manner.** Sin in a relationship that remains un-reconciled for too long gives Satan fertile soil for bitterness.

**One Or Two Others**
Prayerfully, most cases don’t even make it to this level, but they end with level two, the offender is convicted, and you have “won your brother over.” The scripture says this happens when he “listens” to you. What does it mean? I used to think that after I approached somebody, they needed to acknowledge their wrongdoing on the spot, and anything short of agreement was a refusal to listen. This idea is embarrassingly unrealistic. “Winning your brother over” may take more than one appointment. It may take several talks. Often, when someone is confronted on sin (especially sin they don’t see immediately), they are caught off guard, and although their response is to disagree, they may go away, think about it, and come around. “Listening” to you or not is not a one-time event, it is a conclusion (unless my brother isn’t quite understanding how stealing my money is a sin!). The truth is, we may need to take more time to let the conviction sink in, especially in fuzzy areas.
However, if someone refuses to listen to you, go find one or two others, ask them to get with you and that person, and re-open the discussion. Obviously, we need to try our best not to overly bias the “others” regarding our view, even to the point of NOT filling them in on the details. Sometimes even your body language can express your bias over the situation to the “others.” Just voice the fact that there is a disagreement, and let the group come to the proper conviction (of course being open to MY viewpoint actually being wrong!).

**Important note:** Levels two and three are considered informal levels of discipline, as they don’t involve the church, just the specific parties involved. I firmly believe if we teach people the fundamentals, and expect them to be spiritual and responsible, very few cases will progress to levels four and five (formal levels, as they involve the church).

**Tell It To The Church**

Matt 18:17

17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church…”

In these five words, “tell it to the church,” Jesus makes things very clear, but also leaves us with the stickiest level to put into practice. I wish he would’ve outlined a process, but he doesn’t. The best we can do is to piece together other pertinent scriptures regarding formal church discipline.

**Important note:** Obviously, “telling it to the church,” is distinct from “treat them as a pagan or a tax collector.” Jesus still leaves one more level after this. The reason we are to tell it to the church is that the church becomes the “last stop” for this person to repent. In other words, whereas during the first three levels, individuals were the counselors for the offender, now the whole body takes on this role! If the discipline process makes it this far, there are very serious problems.

Why do we bring somebody’s sin before the congregation? So they will feel ashamed, and get an overwhelming sense of their sin, so they can finally repent!

**Important note:** The seriousness of this stage presupposes that we have taken all care, and have exhausted all resources in getting a person to truly repent. My suggestion is that the before officially “telling it to the church,” the full-time leadership (with discussion led by the elders if possible) meet with the person one more time, to inform them of the urgency of this process, while urging them one more time to repent. Make sure the church is told that this was carried out.

What should the congregation be told about the person?

1. *That the offender is under discipline based on their lack of repentance.* I truly believe that this is the point at which a person is “marked.” Consider the following verse:

2 Thess 3:14-15
14 If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. 15 Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

note: NT:4593
semeioo (say-mi-o'-o); from NT:4592; to distinguish, i.e. mark (for avoidance):
KJV - note.

It’s important to understand that the potential person Paul is speaking of is to be taken “note” of, or marked for identification, so that he and his sin will be clear to the entire congregation. Even more important, is that he follows that directive with the encouragement for the church NOT to regard him as an enemy of the church (a pagan or tax collector), but warn him as a brother. So, the church in Thessalonica was instructed to treat an unrepentant brother differently, to not even associate with him, so as to make him feel the full weight of his sin. The offender is identified for practical purposes: without knowing who is in this state, the congregation can’t treat them accordingly.

Important note: I firmly believe that the potential brother in 2 Thessalonians 3 is in a different state than the immoral brother in 1 Corinthians 5. Paul is angry about their unwillingness to deal with his sin at the very early levels of church discipline. The unfortunate thing is now that Paul has found out about it, it has progressed to the worst situation possible, and the church members are boasting! Paul enters the scene way down the line, and his suggestion is that this man be immediately removed (coincidentally, their indifference to his sin is condemned by Paul as adamantly as the sin itself, proving that we all have not only a right, but a responsibility to administer church discipline!).

1 Cor 5:9-13
9 I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people- 10 not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. 11 But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. 12 What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? 13 God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."

I believe the difference between 1 Cor. 5 and 2 Thess. 3 is this: the brother in 1 Cor. 5 is to be considered an unbeliever. Paul tells the church in an earlier verse to hand him over to Satan, and later calls him a “wicked man.” He is to be removed from the fellowship for the purpose of reclaiming his soul for salvation (which indeed worked, for he might be the person restored in 2 Cor. 2!).

2. The congregation may no longer fellowship with him as if everything were normal. The church members are told things like:
-“do not even eat with him”
-“do not associate with him”
-“do not have company with him” (KJV – 2 Thess. 3:14)

The congregation is to acknowledge him as a brother, but a brother whose status in the church is in serious question. This is big, because it clearly changes the nature of their relationships (that seems to be the point). It’s important for members to understand that they cannot resume normal fellowship with this person until repentance has taken place. Sentimentality can hurt the process, and actually hurt someone’s chance at really repenting. Many of us have witnessed success stories, where someone was marked, called to repentance, treated accordingly by the fellowship, and consequently their heart was broken by God, allowing them to see their sin and recover.

**Question:** If we are to avoid fellowship with someone in this state, but are directed to counsel them back to repentance, doesn’t it make sense that they should be told not to come to church or Bible Talk?

**Question:** Does this mean that the person under formal discipline in level four is not allowed to partake in the Lord’s Supper? Some scholars believe that they should be forbidden to partake because the Lord’s Supper in 1 Cor. 10:16-17 is “communion,” or fellowship, the very thing forbidden at stage four. The scripture says that when we break bread, we participate together in the body of Christ, which clearly is fellowship.

3. **The church is to assume the role of counselor.**
   Galatians 6:1-2 – “restore” him gently
   2 Thess. 3:15 – “warn” (or admonish) him as a brother

   The overriding goal is to bring the person to repentance, so counseling now becomes a group process. They are to be brought before the congregation, identified, revoked of certain privileges, and counseled back to reconciliation.

**Treat them as a pagan or a tax collector**

Again, to me it seems that step four is what we would consider “excommunication.” The word means that the person is “cut off” from communion with the rest of the body (forbidding them to partake of the Lord’s Supper). Many people believe excommunication is step five. Step five is *complete removal from the body*. They are NOT to be treated as a brother, but to be considered an unbeliever. Webster’s dictionary defines is like this:

Excommunicate – to cut off officially with communion with the church; to exclude from fellowship.

In 2 Thessalonians 3:15, Paul instructs the church to not associate with him, to “cut off” fellowship,” so as to shame him into repentance. In my opinion, removal from the midst is the last stop, the final blow. Consider the following passages:

**Matthew 18:17** – treat him as a pagan or a tax collector
Pagans were never part of the church, and tax collectors were condemned because of their theft and deceit. This is clearly the state of a non-believer, NOT the brother under the discipline of 2 Thess. 3:14.

1 Cor. 5:2 – remove him from your midst
1 Cor. 5:5 – hand him over to Satan! (we’re not told to do that to a brother)
1 Cor. 5:7 – get rid of the old yeast
1 Tim. 1:20 – I have handed them over to Satan to be taught!

Step five is the last stop. The situation has reached its limit, and now the Bible teaches that the offender is being brought from the light back into the darkness!

What are we to do with them if they want to continue contact with the church, or if members have a relationship with them? We are to treat them as a pagan or tax collector – unbelievers, or unrepentant sinners! That means we need to treat them like any other visitor, with the exception that the congregation is aware of their sin, and won’t stand for one minute of slander or divisiveness. If they are to be treated like unbelievers, doesn’t it make sense that they can partake in the Lord’s Supper? The person under discipline in level four is to be treated differently, because they are claiming to be a disciple. The person removed from the midst of the church is clearly a non-Christian!

Important note: The only scripture I can find about literally “casting someone off,” and forbidding them from even coming to church is in the case that they are divisive, in which case, we are told to have “nothing to do with them,” and their reckless talk will damage the entire church. However, usually when someone in this situation returns (if at all), their folly is clear to everyone, and the members are on the lookout for them. If they come out of a sincere heart to change, we need to rejoice. They may want to finally recognize their sin and repent.

The Divine authority God has granted His church for these purposes

Perhaps one reason why the churches have wavered at times in their administration of correct church discipline is laziness, or not wanting to really deal with sin. I have a feeling the bigger reasons have to do with members not knowing how to properly carry it out, and also a lack of confidence. We need to understand that God has given His church his blessing when they carry out informal and formal discipline. He tells us that he trusts the wisdom of many witnesses, and recognizes the authority of the church as binding:

Matt 18:18-20
18 "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."
In 2 Cor. 2:10, Paul tells the church, “If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him.” He is referring to a person whom they have disciplined, and Paul is suggesting that he has learned his lesson, but also that in his absence, he trusts their opinion in the matter. In Matthew 18:18-20, it is as if Jesus is saying the same thing: “I trust the decisions you have made regarding church discipline.” In His absence, he has left His church to deal with these matters, and whatever the earthy “court” of the church has decided, he recognizes as having already been loosed in heaven! Unrepentant sinners who have been given every chance to repent can’t appeal to heaven for vindication. Their sentence on earth has been duly noted. This should give us a tremendous amount of confidence in dealing with sin seriously in our church. Also, it should develop in us a deep conviction to handle things properly, with patience, and with great care. We always want to be sure that what we’re doing is correct, not just an overreaction (or under reaction!).

The case of divisiveness
Titus 3:9-11
10 Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. 11 You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

Paul seems to want to “speed” up the process in the case of divisive people. Confront them twice, and then put them out, having nothing to do with them. I’m sure Paul was witnessing the destructive force of first-century Judazers, who were slandering Paul’s teaching and motives with impunity. They were dangerously dividing the new converts and throwing their faith into turmoil. I believe he found the effect of divisive people to be more immediate than other offenses, and therefore suggested a more radical approach. Imagine how many of our congregations would have been spared needless misery if this approach were followed, with Godly confidence!

What about fuzzy issues?
I’ve mentioned “fuzzy” issues several times. While so many sins are obvious (Gal. 5:19), many would fall into this category. How do we know this or that is a sin? Is this just a matter of opinion? Is this a real conviction your advocating, or have your feelings been hurt? Is this a disputable matter? We could debate on and on about some things, and still have varying opinions. How do we know the truth in these fuzzy areas? I’m sure there is more to it, but I have two suggestions:

1. Proceed with caution, open to the fact that you are wrong on an issue. Get tons of input, and pray a lot about it before proceeding. You may find that it is NOT something to bring up, or you may find otherwise. It just makes sense that if something falls into this category, more time is spent analyzing it.

2. God has actually built in the wildcard – the many witnesses. Many spiritual witnesses will eventually reveal the truth. This makes sense; if a person chooses to take a large group of people to task on something he feels isn’t valid, he is only more clearly exposing his folly. I really believe that the more witnesses involved (progressing on the church discipline process), the less fuzzy an issue gets. It will produce clarity, even on
seemingly disputable matters. Also, if the opinion of many witnesses is made clear, it can filter out the accusations of a few disgruntled people, who seem to be trying to make a huge case out of their opinion or their hurt feeling. This is true of our courts of law, and it was true in the Old Testament:

Num 35:30
30 "Anyone who kills a person is to be put to death as a murderer only on the testimony of witnesses. But no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness."

Clearly, the testimony of one witness can be biased, but the chance obviously decreases with many.

Deut 17:6-7
6 On the testimony of two or three witnesses a man shall be put to death, but no one shall be put to death on the testimony of only one witness. 7 The hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting him to death, and then the hands of all the people. You must purge the evil from among you.

The hands of the witness shall be the first in putting him to death! Wow, what a way to stop frivolous accusations.

Deut 19:15-20
15 One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. 16 If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse a man of a crime, 17 the two men involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the LORD before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time. 18 The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, 19 then do to him as he intended to do to his brother. You must purge the evil from among you.

The church is the Lord’s “office,” and clearly has the authority to decide if a matter is valid.

A word about spouses

I have seen a destructive phenomenon at work in the fellowship. While we understand our biblically mandated “one-another” relationships to each others as brothers and sisters, we fail to carry this over into a marriage relationship. We somehow think that the marriage is sacred ground in terms of discipling, exempt from the Matthew 18 process. To be sure, spouses need to be careful, spiritual, and sensitive as they confront sin in each others’ lives, but to not confront sin in a biblical way is not the answer! Before we are husband and wife, we are brother and sister, brought near to the cross through the blood of Jesus, before being brought together in holy matrimony. Why is this important? It is important because the work of discipling can be undercut in the home:

1. Spouses will tolerate sin in each others’ lives that others will see the need to confront.
2. A husband/wife will often feel “trapped” by the sin of their spouse, feeling that the recourse of Matthew 18 doesn’t apply to a marriage.
3. Sin, gossip, and slander can be tolerated in the home, while not tolerated in the fellowship, simply because “my spouse is my closest friend.”

I do not have the answer to this problem and am aware that crucial subtleties and dynamics at work, but am confident that the marriage relationship is open to the teachings in Matthew 18.

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1 All Scriptures are from the Holy Bible, New International Version, 1985 by Zondervan Corporation.
2 Wray, Daniel, *Biblical Church Discipline*, (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1978), 3-4. While there are major doctrinal portions of this book I disagree with, I found his list to be exhaustive and scriptural. The need for appropriate church discipline cuts deeply across denominational lines. There seem to be many pastors and teachers in churches everywhere who are frustrated by the damage caused in their church by an inability to address and deal with destructive sin.
3 Ibid., 8-9, I have adapted point # 4 to make it specific to our church.
4 For this section, I consulted heavily a book by Jay Adams called *Handbook of Church Discipline*. It is scriptural, reasonable, and above all, advocates using much patience and care in handling these matters.

For Further study:

