

PASTORS

# Vol. 08 -- Confront Sin

*The practice of church discipline: when to confront, how to confront, the Matthew 18 process, restoration as the goal, and protecting the flock without becoming harsh*

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*Equipping pastors and leaders to serve with excellence, integrity, and lasting Kingdom impact.*



# The Lost Practice of Church Discipline

There is a ministry that the New Testament treats as essential to congregational health, that the Reformers listed as one of the three marks of the true church (alongside the Word rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered), and that the contemporary evangelical church has largely abandoned: church discipline. The abandonment is understandable. It has been associated historically with some of the most painful abuses in church history -- inquisitions, public shaming, the weaponization of ecclesial authority against the powerless. And in a therapeutic culture that prizes acceptance and abhors judgment, discipline sounds not just antiquated but cruel.

But the absence of church discipline has its own casualties, and they are equally devastating. The pastor who never confronts the sin in his congregation does not thereby create a community of grace -- he creates a community of accommodation, where people learn to live with their wounds rather than bring them into the light, where patterns of destructive behavior are never named and therefore never healed, where the serious pursuit of holiness is quietly understood to be optional for people who tithe regularly and show up on Sundays. This is not mercy. It is the pastoral equivalent of a physician who, unwilling to cause the pain of diagnosis, allows the disease to progress unchecked.

*"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."*

-- Matthew 18:15-17

Jesus's teaching in Matthew 18 is not a legalistic procedure for organizational management. It is a pastoral framework rooted in profound love for the offending person and the offended community. The entire logic of the passage is oriented toward one goal, stated explicitly in verse 15: "you have gained your brother." Not punished him. Not removed him. Not protected the institution. Gained him. The purpose of every step in the discipline process is the restoration of a relationship -- first between the two parties, then between the offender and the community, and ultimately between the offender and God.

The pastor who reads Matthew 18 carefully will notice that Jesus assumes this process will happen in a community of people who genuinely love each other, who are mutually committed to holiness, and who treat the relationship as worth the cost of the difficult conversation. The process fails -- and becomes merely punitive -- when it is conducted by people who want to be right rather than people who want to restore.

## When Confrontation Is Required

Not every sin requires formal pastoral confrontation. Not every conflict requires the Matthew 18 process. The pastor who interprets his role as the moral monitor of every congregant's behavior will create an exhausted, performance-anxious congregation with no capacity for grace. The question is not "Has this person sinned?" (everyone has) but "Is this pattern of sin causing harm -- to the person, to others, to the community -- in a way that requires pastoral intervention?"

## Four Categories That Require Pastoral Confrontation

*(continued)*

First: unrepentant patterns of sin that are causing demonstrable harm. Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 5 addresses a specific case of sexual immorality not because sexual immorality was unique to Corinth but because it was occurring openly, without repentance, and being tolerated -- even celebrated ("you are arrogant," Paul says, 1 Corinthians 5:2) -- by the congregation. The combination of unrepentance, harm, and congregational endorsement creates a situation that requires pastoral action.

Second: false teaching from within the congregation. Paul's letters are full of instances where specific individuals are named as sources of false teaching that is corrupting the community (Hymenaeus and Alexander in 1 Timothy 1:20; Hymenaeus and Philetus in 2 Timothy 2:17; Diotrephes in 3 John). These are not anonymous dangers -- they are specific people teaching specific errors, and Paul does not hesitate to name them and describe the appropriate response.

Third: divisive behavior that is fracturing the community. Paul's instructions about the "divisive person" in Titus 3:10-11 prescribe a specific process (warn once, warn twice, then have nothing to do with them) because division is not merely interpersonal conflict -- it is an attack on the body of Christ itself. The person who systematically undermines trust in leadership, creates factions, spreads rumors, or fosters an atmosphere of suspicion and conflict is doing profound community harm regardless of their theological orthodoxy.

Fourth: situations that create legal, safety, or mandatory reporting obligations. The pastor must be clear: pastoral discretion has absolute limits when the safety of a vulnerable person is at stake. Suspected child abuse or neglect must be reported to appropriate authorities regardless of congregational or pastoral privilege considerations. Domestic violence requires specific protocols that prioritize the safety of the victim. The pastor who attempts to handle these situations internally, through a church discipline process rather than civil reporting, is not exercising pastoral wisdom -- he is potentially obstructing justice and enabling ongoing harm.

## **How to Confront: The Art of Pastoral Truth-Telling**

Confrontation done poorly causes deep wounds that can take years to heal and may permanently sever the relationship. Confrontation done well is one of the most profound acts of pastoral love available, and people who have received it faithfully often describe it as a turning point -- the moment when someone loved them enough to tell them the truth. The difference lies almost entirely in the how.

### **The Spirit of Confrontation: Gentleness**

Paul's instruction to restore "in a spirit of gentleness" (Galatians 6:1) sets the tone for all pastoral confrontation. Gentleness (*prautes* in Greek) does not mean softness or avoidance. It is the same word used of Moses (Numbers 12:3, in the Greek Old Testament) and of Jesus (Matthew 11:29; 21:5) -- strong, clear, purposeful persons who held their strength under the control of love. Gentleness in confrontation means: the goal is restoration, not punishment; the posture is humility, not superiority; the manner is careful and specific, not sweeping and contemptuous; and the relationship is the frame, not the procedure.

### **One-on-One First: The Private Conversation**

Matthew 18:15 is unambiguous: go first privately, "between you and him alone." This step is routinely skipped in congregational discipline, often because the confronting party is uncomfortable, because they want the validation of others before confronting, or because they have already told others about the offense (making the "private" conversation redundant from their perspective). These are understandable temptations that must be resisted. The private conversation is not merely a procedural step -- it is the expression of a fundamental respect for the person that says: before I involve anyone else, I will give you the dignity of a direct conversation.

The private conversation should: describe specific behavior, not character; express the impact of the behavior on the relationship and the community; invite the person's perspective genuinely (there may be information you do not have); name clearly what change is being requested; and express the desire for the relationship to continue and strengthen. It should not include: character assassination ("you are always..."), public information already gathered about the situation, ultimatums in the first conversation, or pastoral authority deployed as leverage rather than as an expression of care.

### **Bringing Witnesses: The Second Conversation**

If the private conversation does not produce repentance and change, Matthew 18:16 introduces witnesses. The witnesses are not a prosecution team -- they are pastoral companions who serve several functions: they ensure that the conversation is accurately reported to both the person and the church; they provide accountability for both parties to conduct the conversation fairly; they represent the community's investment in the restoration of the relationship; and they are prepared to testify to the consistency and seriousness of the concern if the matter must eventually come before the congregation.

### **The Community Dimension and Final Steps**

The final steps of Matthew 18 -- involving the church, and ultimately treating the unrepentant person as "a Gentile and a tax collector" -- are the most misunderstood and most misapplied in the discipline process. Involving "the church" does not mean a congregational announcement from the pulpit. In most contexts it means the pastoral leadership or elder board, who carry the congregation's authority in matters of community health. The final exclusion ("treat him as a Gentile and a tax collector") is not a sentence of condemnation -- it is a recognition that the unrepentant person has, by their own choice, placed themselves outside the community of covenant. And it is worth noting how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors: he pursued them, ate with them, and brought them the Gospel.



# Restoration: The Goal That Must Never Be Lost

Every step of the church discipline process must be oriented toward restoration. The moment the process becomes primarily about protecting the institution, or punishing the offender, or demonstrating the pastor's willingness to make hard decisions, it has been corrupted. Restoration means the return of the offending person to repentance, to the health of their soul, to right relationship with those they have harmed, and to full participation in the life of the community. This goal must never become secondary.

What does restoration actually look like? It begins with genuine repentance -- not the performed sorrow that wants the consequences to stop, but the genuine godly grief that Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 7:10-11, which "produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret." True repentance involves acknowledgment of the specific harm done, genuine sorrow for the effect on the other person or the community (not just sorrow for the consequences to oneself), and concrete behavioral change that demonstrates the genuineness of the repentance.

Restoration also requires the community's active participation. Paul's instruction about the restored offender in 2 Corinthians 2:7-8 is explicit: "You should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him." The congregation that has participated in a discipline process must also participate in the restoration -- actively, not passively. Restoration is not a private transaction between the pastor and the offender. It is a community act of re-reception.

## Sexual Sin and Moral Failure: The Most Sensitive Cases

Pastoral confrontation of sexual sin -- pornography addiction, adultery, sexual misconduct, same-sex behavior that contradicts the congregation's theological convictions -- requires particular pastoral wisdom and sensitivity. These are the cases where the gap between the public profession and private reality is typically greatest, where shame runs deepest, where secrecy has the longest history, and where confrontation carries the highest risk of the person fleeing the church entirely rather than remaining for the process of restoration.

The approach to sexual sin must be shaped by the distinction between a person who has confessed a struggle and is seeking help, and a person who is engaging in ongoing unrepentant behavior that is causing harm. The person who comes to the pastor with a confession of pornography use and a genuine desire for help needs pastoral support, accountability, referral to appropriate resources, and prayer -- not a church discipline process. The person whose ongoing affair is an open secret in the congregation, who has been confronted privately without response, represents a very different pastoral situation.

## Leadership Accountability: When the Offender Is a Leader

Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy 5:19-20 provides specific guidance for accusations against elders: "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." The elevated accountability that comes with leadership is not punitive -- it reflects the elevated impact of a leader's sin. When a leader falls, the damage radiates outward in ways that a member's sin does not. This is why Paul's standard for elder accusation is higher (requiring multiple witnesses) while the standard for public accountability is also higher.

The pastor who must confront a fellow leader -- an elder, a staff member, a prominent lay leader -- will find this among the most personally costly acts in pastoral ministry. These people are often friends, often powerful in the congregation's structure, often beloved by the congregation in ways that make their accountability difficult. The temptation to find a quiet private resolution that avoids the pain of a more formal process is enormous. The problem is that informal resolutions of serious leadership failure tend to be incomplete, insufficiently accountable, and vulnerable to the accusation (sometimes justified) of covering up rather than genuinely addressing.

## Preventing the Need for Discipline: A Culture of Accountable Community

The best pastoral discipline strategy is a congregation so formed in holiness, honesty, and mutual accountability that the formal processes of Matthew 18 are rarely needed. The goal is not a congregation of people who behave correctly out of fear of consequences, but a community of people who genuinely love each other enough to be honest with each other, who have developed the relational depth and trust to name hard things in the context of genuine care, and who understand holiness not as rule-following but as the natural expression of people who are being transformed by the Spirit of God.

This culture is built through preaching that takes sin seriously without producing shame-based religion, through small group structures where genuine accountability is normalized, through the pastoral modeling of a leader who is visibly accountable to others, and through the celebration of restoration stories that show the congregation what grace-shaped discipline produces. When the congregation has seen a restoration happen -- when they have watched a person confess, be held accountable, and be received back with genuine community love -- they understand the discipline process as a gift rather than a punishment.

## Reflection Questions for the Pastor

1. Have you been avoiding a confrontation in your congregation that should have happened? What has held you back -- fear, relational cost, uncertainty about the process? What is the impact of the continued avoidance?
2. When you have confronted sin in your congregation, what was your primary motivation: restoration of the person, protection of the community, or something else? How did that motivation shape the outcome?
3. Who holds you accountable? Who in your life has the relationship, the authority, and the courage to confront you when you are in sin? What structures do you have in place to ensure that you are not exempt from the accountability you expect of others?
4. What is the culture of accountability in your congregation? Do people experience the community as a safe place to be honestly known and lovingly held accountable, or as a performance culture where the maintenance of appearances is more important than the pursuit of truth?

*The pastor who confronts sin is not the harsh enforcer of a religious code. He is the loving physician who refuses to let a treatable disease progress unchecked because he cannot bear the temporary pain of diagnosis. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend" -- and the most faithful wound is the one delivered with a heart full of love for the person receiving it, and the unshakeable conviction that restoration is possible.*

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