

When a Brother Sins Against You, Part Three

Written by Bob Stone

Suggestions for Steps 3 and 4 of Matthew 18 What can specifically be done at step three?

The reason for this step is so that the whole congregation may be involved in an attempt to reach the offender. The reason is not so we can tell people to turn their backs on the individual. We are not to become finger-pointing and condemning people. We are to be "fellow pleaders" that there may be a change of heart, and urge the individual(s) in question to permanently cease from the sin they are involved in.

There are several ways to do this:

First, pray for the offender.

Prayer is urged throughout Scripture as a powerful weapon to change people's thinking and way of life:

- Pray that God will grant godly repentance to the offender (see "How to Repent and Help Others to Repent")—2 Cor. 7:8-16
- Pray that God will help them to come to a knowledge of the truth, come to their senses, and escape the trap of Satan—2 Tim. 2:23-26).
- Pray for those who have been hurt by the sin. There are always innocent ones involved, and they are being damaged and hurt. So we need to support them and show compassion in tangible ways.

A special prayer meeting with the other members of congregation may be appropriate.

Second, the congregation should directly express love and concern for the individual involved.

Urge them to repent and give in to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. This is especially helpful with people who are friends of the individual and have known them for a long time. This is a time for friends to wound rather than kiss (Prov. 27:6)

In many instances, friends are not willing to risk their friendship, or they think this kind of

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action is too harsh. The result is that the offender gets mixed signals and may be encouraged to continue in sin, because those closest to him/her are saying nothing. The corporate effect of many, especially close friend, will have a great impact on this process.

Third, individuals in the congregation can share their experience in finding God's grace and forgiveness in their own lives and how they were able with God's help to turn from their sin.

What is appropriate for a church to do in a meeting called for the purpose of the third step?

The following is a case study from Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California. This is an edited transcript of the meeting. The names have been changed, however, to protect those involved. After the teaching was given to the congregation concerning the Matthew 18 process, this is an excerpt of the conclusion of that meeting.

Now we come to the moment that I intensely dislike. This has not been an academic study, as I am sure you realize. We have an actual case before us that requires this action. So with great sorrow and personal pain I must reveal the name to you and the sin of the offender whom we have been speaking of this morning. Let me say that this has been compounded in agony for all of us by the fact that this man has been an elder of this congregation for over 10 years; he has been a Bible teacher and a counselor among us. I refer to our brother, John Watkins. About eight months ago, information reached us that he was involved in an extramarital affair. One of our pastors met with him concerning this situation and the man admitted to this. He admitted it not to this pastor at the first meeting but subsequently several times to all of us. In talking with him it came to light that this has been going on for a number of years. Further, because this was a financial drain upon him, he used his position as an elder to borrow extensively from several people in this congregation and has thus contracted a heavy debt under essentially false pretenses.

Though at the first meeting he was repentant, submitted himself to the elders' counsel, sought forgiveness from his wife and began the repayment of this debt, we have in recent days learned that he is still involved with the other woman and is unwilling to break off this affair. So we come reluctantly, painfully and sorrowfully to seek the involvement of the church, to ask all who know him to seek to turn him, to reach his conscience and deliver him. The apostle Paul instructs us in 1 Timothy concerning an elder: *'Never admit any charge against an elder except on the evidence of two and*

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three witnesses. As for the presence of all, so that the fear.' *those rest may stand in* *who persist in sin, rebuke them in*

Today we are simply attempting to be obedient to those words. We do so out of a deep sense of our own vulnerability.

There is not one of us who could not have fallen into the same condition had we not taken hold of the resources that were provided to all in the Word and by the Spirit. I am sure many of you have questions about this. Perhaps someone is saying, 'How can this happen? How can a man to whom leadership is entrusted, who understands and is even teaching the Scriptures, who does personal counseling, how can he allow himself to be involved in such a thing as this?

The answer, of course, which is everywhere given in is, the deceitfulness of sin. Sin has a strange poser to deceive us and to make us justify what we are doing. This is not easy to do. I personally dislike intensely what I am doing now. But it must be done if we are to be obedient to the Word of God. So on the behalf of the elders of this congregation

I would urge you all to join us in trying to reach our brother, to help him to see how serious this is and to help him recover. We want to see him forgiven and restored, the improper liaison ended, and to be back again with his brothers and sisters in Christ. To that end we ask your involvement and your prayer.

This has been a sobering meeting. I cannot think of anything more fitting by way of closing than to stand quietly together and to commit this matter to the Lord in prayer.

Our Heavenly Father, we are made aware by this passage of the purity of the church, of the holiness of our Lord, of the evil that destroys among us, of the cleverness of the devil in tricking and deceiving us by attractive lies. Forgive us all, Lord, and help us to be loving, faithful members one of another. We pray for our brother. We pray you will restore him, that you will deal with him, that this need not go the last and final stage of being delivered unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh. We pray for his wife and his children, that you will uphold them and strengthen them in this time. May we together share not only in pain, but also ultimately in the recovery, and rejoice in your grace and in your mercy to us. We commit this, then, into your loving hands that you may do as seems best in your eyes. In Jesus' name. Amen.

What should happen if the congregation must take step 4?

The following is a suggestion, with some items included from a meeting called for this purpose.

Worship

Purpose of the process of Matthew 18. This meeting has been called to complete the process of Matthew 18.

The background of the process (why have we come to this moment)

Some have felt the elders to be too slow in this process; others may feel we are moving too fast. Our desire is to err on the side of grace, and not the law. This process has been tremendously exhausting. It called for many hours of prayer and counsel. Therefore, we have not come here flippantly or without a great deal of soul-searching of our own. Our desire is also to show the same care and patience we would desire if we were the person needing restoration.

The specific purpose of the process. It is two-fold:

- To bring repentance—not condemnation (John 8:1-11)
- To bring ultimate forgiveness and restoration of fellowship with God and the church

Update of the process so far. What have we done up to this point?

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1. On (date) the Body was presented the third step of the Matthew 18 process.

- Read Matthew 18:15-20.
- Point out that copies of the whole teaching on the process are available.

1. At this point we have done our best to comply with each of the steps.

2. Review of last meeting: the parties involved (who are they?); the steps that were agreed to (what were they?); the specific sin and command of Scripture that was violated. (State them specifically again.)

3. Answers to some questions that may have come up (questions people have asked, as well as audience.)

4. Review of what has happened since the last meeting.

- The results of the steps (review for congregation).
- The conclusion from these steps.

This meeting is not a trial, nor do we feel we should get involved in second guessing what we could have done. We come before you and God stating that as elders we believe we have done what God has called us to and in keeping with Matt. 18:15-20 and Gal. 6:1-5. We also feel confident that we as elders of the church have the spiritual insight from God, and all the information necessary to make a decision on these matters (see 1 Cor. 6). We further believe that we give our judgment on these matters, that in the same way we judge, we will be judged (Matt. 7:1-2).

The judgment. What is it?

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First, concerning the one who first instituted the first step of the _____ process:

- Our view of their life, character and attitude is:
- Our encouragement for their continued life and ministry is

(Often, the one who has been sinned *against* is put under close _____ scrutiny and judgment as well. It is appropriate that the elders publicly _____ clear that person's name at this time and give him/her encouragement for _____ their life and attitudes through the entire process.)

Second, concerning the one who has sinned and not repented.

- Because (name) failure to repent of (specific sins) and because of _____ (name) failure to show signs of repentance listed in 2 Cor. 7:8-13, _____ according to Matthew 18:15-20, (name) is to be treated as a sinner and _____ not a member of the Body of Christ.
- According to 1 Cor. 5:1-5, we as elders feel that this recognition _____ is the same as turning (name) over to Satan, so that his/her sinful _____ nature will be destroyed and their spirit saved on the day of the Lord _____ (See also 1 Tim. 1:18-20.)
- In other words, we commit (name) to the Lord to use any and all means _____ He might, to bring (name) to repentance, so that he can be restored _____ to us and the community of Christ.

Concerning our reponse: How should we relate to this person from _____ now on?

- We are to treat them as a sinner (according to Jesus' teaching in _____ Matt. 18:17).
- We are to refrain from building close relationships (1 Cor. 5: 9-13).
- We are to act redemptively toward this person—always being willing _____ to help this person to come to repentance (James 5:19).
- We are to discourage their attendance in our services and church life _____ because of the negative effect Paul describes in 1 Cor. 5:6-12.

Final Action

- Stand and sing: "Have Thine Own Way"
- Examination of our hearts

- Prayer

Public Announcement for Meeting Called for the Purpose of Church Discipline (an Example)

Tonight we are going to deal with something that affects us all. It's very seldom that a church is called upon to collectively deal with the discipline of its members, but tonight, during our Body Life Service, we will be doing that. Now, whenever there is a need to walk through Matthew 18:15-20, we must understand that it seriously affects everyone who attends this church. If you were not present when we went through this teaching, please pick up the outlines in the Resource Room after the service.

We are deeply saddened to report to you that one of our pastors (elders) has fallen victim to sin and after meeting many, many times over the past six weeks, we have decided upon a course of action that affects the entire church. It will be loving but difficult to go through for all involved.

So, I urge you this afternoon to pray that Satan will be bound, and that Jesus will be glorified in our midst as we carry out this action.

Therefore, if this is your church home, whether a member or not, we want you here tonight. Nothing you can think of—apart from death, serious illness, or work—is more important. I've never asked you as strongly to be at a meeting in the 8 1/2 years I've been your pastor, but this meeting is that important.

It's together we want to address this problem, and unitedly, with compassion and love, correct the situation we have before us. So **we need you.**

What is appropriate until then? Prayer and examination of our hearts is the best thing we can do. Jesus tells us in Matthew 7:1-6 that if we are going to remove a speck from a brother's eye, we need to make sure there is no 2 x 4 in our own eye. So let's do that. Let's examine ourselves to see if we are walking in obedience to our Lord.

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On the other hand, what is not appropriate? Speculation, discussion, and gossip is totally inappropriate. Anyone who gossips or speculates about our actions should know it is sin, and if we find out about it, we will deal seriously with it. So, let's all watch our tongues.

We believe there can be a healing touch in church discipline, and that if we handle it biblically, it can bring purity and repentance to an entire congregation, as well as those directly involved. So, please be here tonight with much prayer.

The previous announcement is adapted from a very helpful book entitled: Beyond Forgiveness, by Don Baker, Multnomah Press, 1984, p. 51. It is essentially this announcement that was used at Hillcrest Chapel, February 16, 1986.

Discipline of a Pastor/Elder

A Service Called for the Purpose of Step 3 of Matthew 18:15-20

Introduction to Meeting

1. Worship
2. Hold hands and pray
3. Read Matthew 18:15-20 and I Tim. 5:17-20

The Teaching and Explanation given by Pastor

Tonight we are involved in a process that we have had to do only one other time as pastor of _____. That is to obey the Word of our Lord Jesus given in Matthew 18. We have had many involved in the first two of the four steps mentioned there, but only once have we had to come to the third step, and only once to the fourth step. That is a great testimony to your willingness to respond to those who have lovingly come to restore you.

The source of the teaching. Now, I would like to point out to you that the words

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we read from Matthew 18 are the words of Jesus, therefore, they cannot be ignored. He is Lord of the church; He is head of the Body. These words have been abused and misused by many churches, but in the spirit of Christ, we must still obey.

The sin of the passages. It is clear that this passage in Matthew 18:15-20 is dealing with a sin—one that is defined as such by the Word of God. Jesus is not saying, if your brother irritates you, or ignores you, or has idiosyncracies you don't like, you should go to him and take him through the process. Jesus is not saying if you feel a person has a problem, even if you have no proof, you should go to him or her and go through Matthew 18. Jesus is not saying we should take a person through this process who is incapacitated mentally. Obviously, treatment given by a competent and godly professional is what is needed. Jesus is not saying we should take a person through this process who has repented of sin.

The words of Jesus are very specific: *"If your brother sins against you....."* A companion passage in Gal. 6:1 says it this way:

"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently."

The process, therefore, has application when a specific unrepentant sin has been committed.

The possible responses to the teaching. The possible responses are manifold. I would suggest there are four possible responses when we get to the third and fourth steps.

Ignore it. One possible response is to ignore sin and let it go on even if it is common knowledge in the church. Those taking this approach might say, "Who are we to judge" or "This is being too harsh—we just love them even though they are continually living in sin...." Paul's response to this lack of action is recorded in 1 Cor. 5:1-5—

"It is reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. 2] And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? 3] Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were

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present. 4] When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, 5] hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord."

Paul is concerned about this, not only because of the affect of the sin (yeast) as it works its way through the whole Body.

Fight over it. A second response is to get embroiled in a fight; choosing sides and dividing on one side or the other. Paul's response to this possibility is also helpful.

2 Cor. 12:19-13:4—"Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening. 20] For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, feactions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. 21] I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged. 13:1] This will be my third visit to you. 'every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' 2] I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. 4) For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by all God's power we will live with Him to serve you."

Whenever this happens and sides are taken, it is testimony that the participants are immature and still worldly. 1 Cor. 3:1-4.

Be too harsh. A third reponse is to judge too harshly. Paul has something to say about this as well.

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2 Cor. 2:4-11—*For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you. 5] If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent—not to put it too severely. 6] The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. 7] Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8] I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. 9] The reason I wrote you as to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. 10] If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, 11] in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes."*

Paul had to tell them once they did expel the brother, to then forgive, comfort and reaffirm their love for the immoral person of 1 Cor. 5.

Be obedient in love. A fourth response is to humbly, and with great love, obey Matt. 18:15-20. This is what we believe you will do. We have confidence in your desire to obey God.

The scope of this teaching. Now the question is, does this process apply to everyone—even the pastors/elders of a given church? Yes it does! Turn to 1 Tim. 5: 17-21—

17) "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor especially those who work is preaching and teaching. 18] For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain' and 'The worker deserves his wages.' 19] Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. 20] Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning. 21] I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing of favoritism."

Here we see the instruction of Paul to Timothy, concerning a fellow elder. You will note there are specific instructions for the elder who directs the affairs of the church well, and instructions for the elder who sins. Those who direct the affairs of the church well, are worthy of double honor, especially the preaching and teaching elder. This double honor is seen in two ways:

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1. First, his provision. He is to receive wages worthy of his work. When possible, generous provision is to come his way.

2. Second, his protection. The elder is not to be open to slander by the immature, or the one who is out to undermine his authority. Those accusations are to be brought by two people to recognized spiritual authority. They determine if a sin has been committed.

He is not to be tried by gossip!

On the other hand, those who sin are to be rebuked. The definition of rebuke is to be put to shame, convince, refute, confute, show to be wrong, prove guilty, to prove anything that was disputed or denied. The place of the rebuke is "public" (i.e. a meeting of fellow Christians). The reason for the rebuke is so that others will take warning. That included members of the congregations, as well as fellow elders.

Here Paul gives the weak-hearted and reluctant a strong command. 1 Tim. 5:21—"*I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism.*"

This is a charge in the sight of God and Jesus Christ and the elect angels. I know of no charge in Scripture that is stated with this kind of reinforcement. This instruction is to be kept—obeyed.

- Without partiality
- Without favoritism

Obviously it is easier to obey in cases where we don't know the person well, or don't like him. It's much tougher with someone who is a friend.

The specific application of this meeting. The situation we are facing tonight is that an accusation is being brought against an elder of our church (name) by at least two witnesses. These have been brought to the remaining elders, and the accusations have been checked. There have been numerous meetings to make sure the accusations were true, as well as the extent of the accusations.

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We have also talked with (name) numerous times about the accusations to get his responses, and the elders themselves have added our own input and judgment into the process as well. We come tonight to lay before you these accusations and to solicit your prayer and help, because we believe (name) has not come to complete repentance in these matters.

We believe there has been acknowledgment and confession, but not repentance as listed in 2 Cor. 7:8-13—

"Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—9] yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. 10] Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. 11] See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter. 12] So even though I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did the wrong or of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are. 13] By all this we are encouraged."

A person who has fully repented will show all the responses of verse 11. Therefore, we believe total repentance has not taken place.

The accusations brought are as follows: (These should be listed individually. Along with each accusation should be the specific passage of Scripture the accused has violated. If no Scripture can be found, then it isn't an accusation that should be received.)

The questions that are in your mind.

1. The first question might be, why are the elders proceeding with the process now? Why not wait until repentance comes?

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- to stop rumors.
- to not give Satan a chance to undermine the work of God.
- because the Scripture calls up to rebuke an elder for persistent sins. 1 Tim. 5:17-20.

This doesn't mean every time an elder sins he is to be brought a congregation. These are sins that are repeated and unrepentant and that undermine the credibility of that elder and his ministry. The action taken may be different after each rebuke, but if they are unrepentant, this process must be made through the steps in Matthew 18.

So we'll focus our attention on proper things. Gal. 6:1-4—*"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. 2] Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. 3] If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. 4] Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else..."*

Here's what we want to focus on:

- 1) Restoration of a brother. v. 1a
- 2) Proper attitude—gentleness. v.1b
- 3) Cautions of temptation (i.e. gossip, slander, falling into the same sin). v. 1c
- 4) Bear the burden—in prayer. v. 2
- 5) Examination of our hearts. v. 3-4

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6) Everyone carrying the load. v. 5

1. A second question might be, what should be our response from this point on?

We are not to become finger pointing and condemning people, but fellow pleaders and fellow pray-ers. We are to plead—with tough love. For example: through natural contacts you might have; through notes or letters. Share experiences in finding God's grace and forgiveness in your own lives.

Fellow pray-ers (Remember Matthew 18:15-20)

Pray for godly repentance (2 Cor. 7: 8-10). Pray that God will help (name) to come to a complete knowledge of the truth (2 Tim. 2: 23-26). Pray for those who have been hurt by the sin. Pray that Satan will be bound and godly conviction and repentance will come (Matthew 18:18).

We are, above all, to be humble and have God search our own hearts. Some of us here may be guilty of similar things. We need to repent (Matt. 7:3-5). Some of us are arrogant and think we are above failure (1 Cor.10:12—"So if you think you are standing, be careful that you don't fall.") Some of us may need to take the initiative and take care of sins in our lives, by going to those we have sinned against (Matt. 5: 23-26).

1. A third question could be, how can this happen? How can a man to whom leadership has been entrusted; who understands and is even a teacher of scriptures; who does personal counseling—how can he allow himself to be involved in a such a thing? The answer is, of course, the deceitfulness of sin. Sin has a strange power to deceive us and to make us justify what we are doing.

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Further clarification from other elders/pastors. Do any of the pastors/elders have anything further to add?

(Possible responses)

- What has been said is in total agreement with all the elders.
- We love all the parties involved in this process. We are doing this because we love them.
- Any further questions you might have after the meeting, come to any of the elders. But please, do not be involved in gossip. It is sin.

Congregational Questions

Are there any questions you might have about what we have done this evening?

Conclusion:

On behalf of the pastors/elders of this congregation, I would urge you then to join us in leading (name) to total and complete repentance.

- to help him see the seriousness of his sin.
- to help him repent and recover completely from his sin.

We want to see him totally restored—**because we love him!** To that end, therefore, we ask your involvement and your prayer. In the event total repentance occurs, we will report that to the Body and forgiveness and restoration will be gladly and joyously given.

In the event it does not come, we will go to the fourth step of Matthew 18.

Stand and sing: "Have Thine Own Way"

Questions Concerning the Application of Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Timothy 5:17-20

What if a person voluntarily removes himself from the church Body during the third step of Matthew 18:15-20? Is self-expulsion accomplishing the same thing as the fourth step?

This is an important question because it impacts the legal arenas in some instances, as well as the church. If we compare Matthew 18:15-20 with 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, it is obvious that one of the reasons Paul wants the immoral person removed from the Body is because of the yeast effect their sin will have. Therefore, if the immoral person removes himself from the Body, won't the yeast be eliminated?

I think the answer is yes. If a person refuses to leave and maintains his/her open sin, however, the body has no choice but to move to the fourth step. On the other hand, if the sinner removes himself he essentially accomplishes the fourth step. The result is that he/she will have no more negative effect upon the church.

The exception might be the innocent party left in the church (the one sinned against—1 Cor. 18:15). It might be good to find some means privately or publicly to declare his/her innocence and the support of the church for that person. They should be assured of their innocence and the continued backing of the entire church. Each church should design its own way to do this, without publicly declaring the guilt of the offending person. This will avoid any legal ramifications.

The person who removes himself from the church should understand two things:

To go to another evangelical church and continue in their sin will cause the same yeast effect upon that church as well. Possibly a private conversation should be initiated with that pastor to inform him that the person in question left without full repentance. The

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church will then be left with the responsibility to decide on its course of action.

Unrepentant people must also understand that they are, in effect, turning their back on Christ and His church by the continued sin, thereby removing themselves spiritually from the benefits of Christian friendship and the blessing of the church. They are essentially turning their lives over to Satan (See 1 Cor. 5:9-13; 5:4-5).

The communication of this matter should be prayerfully and gently given privately by one of the church leaders and then the matter should be committed to God by the church leaders.

Does 1 Timothy 5:17-20 mean that a pastor/elder is to be publicly rebuked even if he even if he repents?

Paul is providing guidelines for situations in which the discipline of a Christian leader appears to be necessary. It builds upon Matthew 18:15-20, but here in this passage in 1 Timothy, he addresses the more specific situation of a sinning leader. A response to the above question is found in *A Guide To Church Discipline*, by J. Carl Laney, Bethany House Publishing, Minneapolis, Mn., 1985, pp. 118-122:

The need for caution— 1 Timothy 5:19. While the elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor (5:17), sometimes they receive the opposite. People will often malign one with whom they disagree. Facts are distorted. Statements are exaggerated.

Several years ago I received a call from a former student asking if it was true that I had divorced my wife. He had been informed by a bookstore manager that the author of *The Divorce Myth* had recently been divorced! I assured him that I was still very happily married and asked [him] to help me put an end to this false rumor. Fortunately, the false statement was corrected and there was no damage to my reputation. But the incident illustrates how easy it is for a Christian leader to be maligned by false accusations.

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The pastors surveyed for this book expressed concern that precautions be taken against charging a pastor falsely. "You must have reliable witnesses." "Act on facts, not hearsay or rumor." "Make certain of the accuracy of the charge." "Get the facts straight before initiating action."

Charles Reagan, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, observes, "The discipline of a church leader is the most serious kind of discipline." In light of the seriousness of this issue, it is crucial that we follow the scriptural guidelines, proceed slowly, and pray persistently when disciplining a Christian leader. Veteran pastor Dr. Jack MacArthur adds, "and be certain your attitude is Christlike."

Paul cautions Timothy and the church of Ephesus, "*Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses*" (5:19). The requirement of two or three witnesses is founded on the Mosaic command (Deut. 17:6) which Christ reiterates in Matthew 18:16. The purpose of the witnesses is to present sufficient evidence for proceeding with disciplinary action against the elder. If sufficient evidence is lacking, no such action should be pursued or contemplated. Kent comments that this safeguard is a wise one: "No person is more subject to Satan's attack in the form of gossip and slander than God's servant." Lenski rightly observed: "The honor due to the office demands this protection, for even a charge of which an elder is acquitted nevertheless damages his office and his work to some degree."

The necessity of rebuke—5:20

The precaution of verse 19 is not designed to protect elders who have failed to live up to the high standards of their office. If the evidence of the witnesses is clear and convincing, disciplinary action must be pursued: "*Those who continue to sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so the rest may be fearful of sinning*" (5:19). Literally the verse reads, "Those who are sinning, rebuke before all, in order that the rest may have fear."

There is some debate as to whether the public rebuke should be reserved for those who persist in sinning or be applied also to the elder who is guilty of only one sin. The translation of the NASB has been construed to suggest that a public rebuke is to be

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reserved for "steadily persist" in sin after being privately confronted on several occasions. Therefore, a genuinely repentant elder need not be publicly rebuked. Proponents agree that the present active tense participle, *hamartanontas*, should be translated, "continue sinning."

Others interpret the present participle as merely descriptive, suggesting that the occasion of any well-attested sin would call for public rebuke; no distinction would be made between those who have repented and those who continue sinning. Paul is therefore contrasting those found innocent with those found guilty are to be publicly rebuked.

There is some truth to both of these viewpoints. Can we find a balance between them? "Those who are sinning" are the elders whose sins, verified by reliable witnesses, have come to light. Those found innocent, of course, are not to be charged. Those guilty are to be rebuked. The present participle, "those who are sinning," is set in doubly honored. Those who default in their duties, bringing dishonor to the name of Christ by their sinful actions, are to be publicly rebuked.

The Jerusalem Bible gives a clear rendering of the original text: *"Never accept any accusation brought against an elder unless it is supported by two or three witnesses. If any of them are at fault, reprimand them publicly, as a warning to the rest"* (5:18-19). The present tense of the participle suggests that one slip-up of failure would not necessitate a public rebuke. But circumstances which reflect a regular failing or character deficiency would demand that public discipline be administered.

Notice that Paul does not give a list of sins which require discipline. He does not suggest that discipline of Christian leaders should be reserved for the gravest of offenses—adultery with the church secretary, embezzlement for the missionary fund, or getting drunk with the communion wine. He simply refers to the "missing of the mark." Those who, as Christian leaders, fall short of God's standard are liable for discipline.

A word of caution is appropriate here. Frequently church members will want to get rid of their pastor and will accuse him of preaching too long, neglecting visitation, or starting a new program without church approval. While these issues must be resolved, they are not biblical bases for church discipline. We must make sure that the discipline is for a definite sin, not just a difference of opinion, personal dislike or hurt feelings.

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The word "rebuked" suggests a reproof which brings conviction. It is used in John 16:8 of the convicting work the Holy Spirit performs towards the unbeliever. In legal contexts, the word means "to cross-examine or question for the purposes of reproof, censuring or accusing."

The emphasis in the original text is on the public nature of the reproof (*"in the presence of all"*). It may be that Paul is assuming the previous steps for discipline, as outlined by Jesus in Matthew 18, have been followed. Or possibly he is setting aside the preliminary steps in view of the office Peter held and the seriousness of the issue (cf. James 3:1; Luke 12:48). This latter view is probably more consistent with Paul's public rebuke of Peter at Antioch (Gal. 2:14) and his pointing out of the sin of Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Tim. 1:20). Public discipline is appropriate, then, in cases where the offense is of a public nature and the offender holds a church office.

What would the public rebuke of a Christian leader involve? It would depend, of course, on the spiritual state of the fallen leader. If genuine repentance has taken place, the "public rebuke" would function more as a "public acknowledgement" of the sin and the repentance that has taken place. This may involve a special church meeting where the failure is confessed and the church unites itself in prayer for the restoration of the fallen soldier. It would be necessary to relieve the elder of his ministry responsibilities until he reestablishes the congregation's trust and his own credibility and reputation. If repentance has not taken place, the rebuke may involve the exposure of the sin, verbal reproof by witnesses, exhortation to repentance, and removal of ordination.

Much prayer and loving concern must go into this disciplinary process, for the process is not to be vindictive, but restorative. Paige Patterson, director of the Criswell Center in Dallas, Texas, says, "...The church must do this with brokenhearted, conscientious concern over those being disciplined with the full understanding that the entire process involved in church discipline is designed to bring about restoration." A rebuke is restorative when it has the offender's best interests at heart and is designed not to punish, but to bring healing. A rebuke is restorative when it moves "beyond forgiveness" and begins the process of rebuilding the fallen Christian leader.

It is not necessary to provide a detailed account of the transgression when rebuking a Christian leader. Paul points out that "it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which

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are done by them in secret" (Eph. 5:12). The church should not cater to the morbid curiosity of people who want to know the intimate details of a pastor's moral failing—number of affairs or names of the women involved. The public disclosure of the specific nature of a sin such as homosexuality or incest make it more difficult for some to forgive. Knowing the details of a pastor's sin may be neither edifying nor helpful. Restraint and caution ought to be observed.

Public discipline is not designed to shame and humiliate the offender, though it might. Paul intends that it serve to heighten the ethics of other Christians (*"in order that the rest may have fear"*). It is debated whether the "rest" (also "all") refers to the other elders or to the whole congregation. The latter viewpoint, of course, would include the former. Those who witness discipline before the congregation are led to reflect on their own lives and how dangerously close they often come to falling headlong into sin. A good, healthy fear of sin and its consequences is restored to a congregation and its leaders when they observe discipline.

Some time ago a Christian leader I know and respect fell into sin and was disciplined by his church. My close association with that situation stirred my heart as never before to pursue a closer relationship with the Lord. Acknowledging how close I had sometimes come to spiritual disaster, I committed myself to spending more time with the Lord and pursuing a more godly life. I have sought all the more to keep my mind and conscience clean and to avoid the entanglements of sin. Although motivated in part by my love for God, I was catapulted out of my spiritual lethargy by fear of the shameful exposure and public discipline.

The demand for impartiality—5:21.

Paul points out in the next verse that discipline must be administered with complete fairness and justice—without prejudice or partiality. He demands serious consideration of these matters: *"I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality"* (5:21).

The word "bias" refers to prejudgment—arrival at a decision before all the facts are in. The term "partiality" refers to an inclination toward someone. The discipline of Christian

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leaders is to be judicious and impartial. A leader, because of sentiment, should not be subject to lighter discipline than another person. It is very easy to respond with our emotions and be more generous in dealing with a leader we love and admire than with others. Probably in no other situation do we see such an expression of our human weakness, either in being overly harsh or in being overly lenient. Those involved in administering church discipline must be neither.

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Policy for Staff Involvement in the Matthew 18 Process

If someone comes to you with a concern or problem with someone else, our responsibility is to turn that person back to the one they are concerned with for a one-on-one encounter or confrontation. Gal. 6:1; Matt. 18:5. We are not free to hear any accusations against another, by another, until they have first gone to the other person. If that person will not go to that person committing the offense, they are to be told strongly that they are contributing to the offender's sin by remaining silent; and therefore, must go if they are to be obedient to the Scripture. At that time, you might want to give them the teaching from Matthew 18, "When a Brother Sins Against You."

If the person goes and still finds a negative response, then you may be called on as a witness to go with them to the person of concern. Matt. 18:16. We are not involved in the second step, however, as the initiators of the conversation or the "heavy" to get things worked out. We are there to witness the statements to both, clarify what each is saying to the other, and then if need be, give our input.

In most cases, however, we are not to be included until the third step of the Matthew 18 process. We, in fact, represent the church and when it comes to the third step, all the elders and/or leaders should be conferred with as to what should be done to move on toward the solution. It is inappropriate, therefore, for us together to discuss another person's problem—its scope or solution—until we have first of all completed the process ourselves.

Now as to advice, or scriptures, or how to counsel another—as long as that person remains nameless and is not judged by your discussion, then it is appropriate to give advice to another staff member or member of the body. If however, the name is dropped, then the discussion ceases, and the person seeking the advice is either encouraged to

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seek another person's advice or go to the person with what information, help, guidance they already have.

If several people are witnesses to a particular act or situation that could be judged as a sin or offense to the kingdom or God, or damaging to the individual involved, then it is appropriate for one to go as a spokesman of the group; but only for that particular witnessed event. Also, that person should go clearly representing the others, to the offended party, as to that one particular incident. If a meeting is positive, then a report as to the victory is to be brought back to the other witnesses; and the one who has committed the offense is to communicate his remorse to the others who witnessed the event.

If, however, several have viewed or heard by first-hand involvement several different incidences and/or offenses against one individual, it is never appropriate that they compare notes or exchange information about the offenses. It is always appropriate for each to encourage the other to go to that individual alone, and that the others only be told of the outcome in two ways.

- That things are taken care of and a victory is present
- Would you come with me as a witness in the second stage of Matthew 18 sequence?

Other conversation concerning the matter is inappropriate until stage three is reached.

If an offense is clearly and openly against the whole community and is in open view of the whole community, and no repentance has occurred, then the elders will make the decision as to how to proceed. If need be, the church board and the membership will also be consulted. (See 1 Cor. 5 for illustration.)

This policy should not restrict advice or counsel given for situations or problems that are not sinful in nature. Certainly we can confer and discuss a person, or group of people's, spiritual progress and how to help them grow into maturity. Also, if we know a person is struggling in a particular area, we should feel free to discuss who could be of help to that person, and what would be needed to help.

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This policy is not designed to restrict us, but to protect us, and also to model to the rest of the body the way it should respond in similar circumstance.

If you do not understand what to do in a particular situation, please feel free to talk to me.

Sincerely,

(Pastor)