You, Yourself Father, discipline us for our good and Your glory. How little we know of selfless discipline. Please give us a heart that beats with Your love so strongly that we dare to discipline well. Amen.

This article reviews the Scriptures that pertain to the church's responsibilities in the area of discipline. The discipline of the church falls into three categories:

1. **Self discipline** is the ongoing personal process of self-examination, confession and repentance. In 1 Corinthians 11:28-32, Paul pointed out that dealing with sin in our lives starts with self-judgment.

2. **Preventative discipline** is another way to describe the process of discipleship. Through fellowship, modeling, teaching and preaching, the truths of God are presented with a view to keeping God's people from sin and from sin's damaging effects. Preventative discipline serves to equip and encourage believers to practice self-discipline so that corrective discipline never becomes necessary.

3. **Corrective discipline** is the function of steering a believer towards righteousness when he is in sin. This ministry of the church is accomplished through teaching, rebuke, and in the extreme, through excommunication. The church does a much better job with preventative discipline than it does with corrective discipline, but both are essential aspects of New Testament Christianity.

R.C. Sproul explains that congregational discipline is actually the corollary to evangelism. "Evangelism is the ministry to those outside the church who are in bondage to sin. Discipline is the ministry to those inside the church who are in bondage to sin."

Some conclude that no one should be concerned about sin in the church...it's God's business. While it's more comfortable to hold that opinion, it is not biblical. Even as God has entrusted parents with the care, training, and protection of their children, so a congregation must act with loving responsibility toward its members. Sinful behavior that dishonors God and is potentially harmful must not be tolerated.

A survey of New Testament passages will enable us to answer the following questions with regard to Congregational Corrective Discipline: What is the basis of Congregational Discipline? What sins call for Congregational Discipline? What procedures are to be followed in carrying out Congregational Discipline? What is the impact of Congregational Discipline? What are the goals of Congregational Discipline?

**WHAT IS THE BASIS OF CONGREGATIONAL DISCIPLINE?**

1. The primary basis of congregational discipline is the holiness of God. In Hebrews 12:10 we are told that God disciplines his children "that we might be partakers of his holiness." Christians are called to active participation in a lifestyle that is distinct and different from the world. In 1 Corinthians 3:17 Paul reminded the Corinthians that believers are the temple of God. The church is to be a place of holiness. Psalm 93:5 declares that "holiness becometh thy house, O Lord, forever." In connection with this uncommon way of life we find the warning of 1 Corinthians 3:16, "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are." The primary basis of congregational discipline is recognition of God's holiness and His command to "be ye holy; for I am Holy" (1 Peter 1:16).
2. The church is God's witness to the world. The church is called to reflect the truth and righteousness of God to a world that knows Him not (cf. 1 Peter 2:11, 12). What the world sees when it observes the church must accurately represent the qualities of God. Sin in the church is like a smudge on a mirror or graffiti on a marble wall. God's indictment against Israel is a sobering example to the church. We must not talk holiness and moral purity and live by a different rule (cf. Romans 2:17-24).

3. The church is under Divine command to practice Congregational Discipline. In Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus gave instructions for discipline in the church which He was about to build. Contained in these instructions, Jesus gave the church Divine authority. He said, "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." In other words, Congregational Discipline was to be recognized as a joint endeavor between heaven and earth. What the church permits, must be permitted by God, and what the church disallows, must be disallowed by God. Corrective discipline is really God's people working in harmony with the purposes of God Himself. The New Testament commands concerning discipline are repeated and expanded in Romans 16:16, 17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15; 1 Timothy 1:18-20; Titus 3:10, 11; Revelation 2:20.

WHAT SINS CALL FOR CONGREGATIONAL DISCIPLINE?
It must be understood that Congregational Discipline is never to be viewed as an attempt to remove all sin from the congregation. There will never be a sinless church until the Lord comes! But there are specific cases where disciplinary action is prescribed.

1. A member who refuses to settle an interpersonal dispute (Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:5, 6).

2. A member who is in continual known sexual sin from which he will not repent (1 Corinthians 5:1-5).

3. A member who continues to be factious and will not change (Romans 16:17; Titus 3:10, 11; Jude 15-19).

4. A member who openly confesses that he will continue to disobey truth when he knows it is truth (2 Thessalonians 3:14, 15).

5. A member who refuses to work for support when he is able to work and employment is available (2 Thessalonians 3:15, 16).

6. A member who involves himself in doctrinal error and false teaching (1 Timothy 1:20; 2 Timothy 2:17, 18; Revelation 2:14-16).

WHAT PROCEDURES ARE TO BE FOLLOWED IN CARRYING OUT CONGREGATIONAL DISCIPLINE?
Four disciplinary steps are given in Matthew 18:15-17.

1. The first step is private reproof (v. 15). The evangelist Charles Finney said that, "if you see your neighbor sin, and you pass by and neglect to reprove him, it is just as cruel as if you should see his house on fire and pass by and not warn him of it."

Notice first, "a brother" is in view here. We have specific responsibilities toward our "brothers" we don't have towards those who are outside of Christ. If the brother listens (and agrees with you is
implied in the word) you have gained him (cf. Luke 17:3 summary).

2. The second step is **private conference** (v. 16). Bible scholars conclude that the purpose of sending witnesses here is not that they witness or establish the original charge, but that they strengthen the rebuke by representing the church. As the church developed, the spiritual leaders were charged to fulfill this obligation (Galatians 6:1). The goals are the same as they were in verse 15: to gain the brother and to persuade him of the error of his ways so he will turn from them.

3. The third step is **public announcement** (v. 17a). If the sinning brother rejects the representatives who have come to him, the spiritual leaders are to inform the church of his sin and unrepentant attitude toward it. In 1 Corinthians 12:14-20 we are reminded that believers are members of one Body and that members have the responsibility to care for one another. That loving care must at times take the form of discipline. At each stage of discipline, the offender must be given time and opportunity to repent.

3. The fourth step is **public exclusion** (v. 17b). When the church leaders and the congregation have prayed and made every effort to bring the offender to repentance, yet without results, they must remove the offender from their fellowship.

Jesus said that the sinning brother who refuses to repent of his sin must be removed from the circle of God's people. We commonly refer to this as excommunication. Excommunication involves cutting a person off from membership, fellowship, and communion. No longer is the unrepentant brother (if he is truly a brother) to share in the activities and privileges of the congregation. In short, the unrepentant believer is to be treated like a non-believer because of his refusal to walk like a believer. As strong as this measure may seem, it's designed to bring the erring brother to full repentance and restoration.

**WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF CONGREGATIONAL DISCIPLINE?**

The continuity between Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 provides the answer for the fourth question. In the church at Corinth there existed a terrible situation addressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13. It was common knowledge that a man in the church was sexually involved with his father's wife. Situations so blatant as this were not found even among Gentile unbelievers! The incestuous relationship had apparently gone on for some time and no corrective discipline had been applied. The problem with the Corinthians was a problem of pride, as seen in verse 2. By disregarding this sin they were acting defiantly toward God.

Paul's judgment of this sin was decisive and clear. He had heard about it while in Ephesus. Even though a considerable distance away, what needed to be done was beyond debate. With the authority of Heaven behind them, the Corinthians were to exercise public exclusion. The sinner and his sin must be removed from the congregation (vv. 2-4).

This most extreme measure would be cause for embarrassment and humiliation. The man disciplined would suffer loss as he was scorned by God's people. Yet there's another dynamic behind public exclusion of a sinning brother. Not only is he put out of the church, but he is delivered "to the realm of Satan for the destruction of the flesh".

Verse 5 views the church as a haven from the world system over which Satan currently holds dominion. While there's nothing mystical about the church building, there is something unique about the Body of Christ. Satan cannot harm those who belong to the living God.

But the man in the text was not walking with God. By his own choosing, he was out from under God's umbrella of protection. His lifestyle rendered him vulnerable to Satan's attacks. The flesh that needed
destruction is either the flesh nature, or the man's physical body or both.

In Galatians 6:7-8, Paul warned his readers concerning the consequences of their choices. It’s as though God says, "If you choose to live in the realm of the flesh, then you will experience all that accompanies those choices." Viewed this way, corrective discipline is God giving a man over to the consequences of his appetites and the church taking its stand with God in allowing it to be so. Paul further warned that the purging process was necessary because like leaven, unjudged sin has a spreading, corrupting effect on the whole congregation (vv. 6-8).

In the final disciplinary instructions of this chapter Paul spoke on a more personal level concerning the responsibility of individual members of the congregation. Distance is to be maintained between the sinning brother and other members of the church (vv. 9-13). The fellowship once enjoyed is to be discontinued until the sinning brother repents of his sin. Sitting together over a meal is an illustration of what might be considered inappropriate contact with one who is under corrective discipline.

In 2 Thessalonians 3:6, the word used to describe dis-fellowshipping is "withdraw." Again in 2 Thessalonians 3:14, we find the admonition "to have no company with" him. Verse 15 supplies an important qualification. We are not to consider the disciplined man an enemy; he is still a brother in the Lord. Contact with him may continue, but only for the purpose of admonition. In Romans 16:17, the word used to describe the discipline is "avoid." He is to be shunned.

The dis-fellowshipping of a member can be very effective, but only as the body remains united in the discipline. Like the situation where husband and wife don't agree on the discipline of their children, the church is often divided. Sentimentality has often replaced biblical thinking and decisive obedience. As a result, discipline breaks down and the intended goals of discipline are seldom achieved.

WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF CONGREGATIONAL DISCIPLINE?

The goal of church discipline concerning the offender must always be his restoration (cf. Galatians 6:1). In each disciplinary step outlined by Jesus in Matthew 18, the goal is to restore or gain the brother. To be restored, repentance is required. Repentance is a change of mind and action: a 180 degree turn about. To this end, the church must constantly intercede.

While church discipline is often cast in a negative light, the results for the disciplining church are intensely positive.

1. Loving discipline unites the family. Sin that is ignored or tolerated will quench the Spirit and eventually lead to division. Righteousness brings people together.

2. Discipline strengthens and reinforces the authority of the Word of God.

3. Discipline honors Christ and brings renewed blessing.

4. Loving discipline challenges the church to new levels of spiritual experience and growth.

5. Discipline strengthens and purifies the testimony of God's people in a given locality.

In the final analysis, the practice of God's holiness and the manner of God's loving chastisement must be the model we follow. When the offender repents, our forgiveness and willingness to restore must be God-like as well. That is a subject addressed in 2 Corinthians and illustrated so forcefully in the parable of the Prodigal (Luke 15).