



# **Church Discipline Guidelines**

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## **PROVIDENCE BAPTIST CHURCH**

### **CHURCH DISCIPLINE GUIDELINES**

#### **I. PREAMBLE**

The church is the bride of Christ, set apart to be holy. "Just as He Who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'" (1 Peter 1:16). Discipline is an integral part of the way that God deals with His children, and shows His love for them. "The Lord disciplines those He loves..." (Proverbs 3:12a). "God disciplines us for our good that we may share in His holiness." (Hebrews 12:10b).

The word "discipline" comes from the Latin "discipulus," meaning "student or pupil," referring to that which corrects, molds or perfects. Discipline is a part of discipleship and includes training, exhortation, encouraging and correction.

In this regard, "discipline" involves every aspect of the church's ministry to help its members address sin and pursue holy living. There is positive or "formative discipline" that involves preaching, teaching, worship, prayer, Bible study, small group fellowship, service and other instructive and encouraging activities that help us to grow in truth and love. Just as in families, God has provided for "corrective" or "restorative discipline" in the church. When we sin or disobey God's commands, He corrects us. One way He does this is to call the church, out of love for us, to seek after us and help guide us back to right relationship with God and others. Restorative church discipline takes place in the context of community and involves warnings, admonishment, exhortation and other corrective actions intended to help the person correct his<sup>1</sup> sinful way.

These guidelines address the corrective or restorative church discipline process for Providence Baptist Church. In general, the term "church discipline" below shall refer to restorative church discipline.

When a person chooses to join the church, as the body of believers in Jesus Christ, the church initially must hear his testimony and receive evidence that the person has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. As a believer, each person subjects or submits himself to God's Word as revealed in Scripture. One aspect of that submission is submission to the authority of the church, as provided in Scripture. An area of the church's authority over its members includes church discipline as set forth in Matthew 18:15-17 and carried out by the local body of believers. Instruction for church discipline is addressed in the Providence Bylaws, Section III – Membership – Discipline of Members and Termination of Membership.

Church discipline is not an option, but is a command of Christ. There are at least three purposes or motivations of church discipline:

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<sup>1</sup>His – masculine pronouns are typically used in this document for simplicity but can be read as gender neutral (i.e. his or her)

- 1) Love for the person motivates us to take action to seek restoration and reconciliation of the fallen Christian to a healthy relationship with Christ and others (Matthew 18:12-15; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; 7:8-10; Galatians 6:1-2; 2 Timothy 2:25; Hebrews 3:12; James 5:19-20).
- 2) Love for our Lord motivates us to guard and preserve the honor of Christ (Romans 2:24; 1 Corinthians 10:31; 1 Peter 2:12).
- 3) Love for the church motivates us to protect the purity of the church, the Bride of Christ (Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5:6; Ephesians 4:3, 5:27; 1 Timothy 5:19-20; Titus 3:10-11; 2 Peter 3:14).

God, through Christ, is the great reconciler and restorer. Each believer in the gospel of Jesus Christ has been reconciled from hopeless sin to redeemed life with their Savior. This is evident in Scripture from passages such as Romans 5:10-11 and Colossians 1:21-23. In 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, God reaffirms this fact and also gives believers this ministry of reconciliation.

A tendency is to measure success of church discipline by the response of the person involved as well as the church member's support. It is important to realize that there are multiple purposes of church discipline and also that unlike us, God considers success in terms of faithfulness to His Word regardless of the immediate results.

In contemplating the responsibility of the body in the area of church discipline we recognize that all Christians sin. In most cases however, the individual believer, either alone or in fellowship with other believers, deals with his sin through repentance and continues to grow in faith. In no way should the procedure outlined below usurp the ordinary sharpening process of individual believer to individual believer. Use of this procedure is contemplated in the case when the usual and ordinary methods have failed.

In considering what sins are to be subject to church discipline, the New Testament examples addressed sins that were publically known or outwardly evident. This meant that Christ's Name was being dishonored, reproach was being brought on the church, and there was likelihood that others would be influenced by the sinful pattern of life.

In Matthew 18:15-17, the Lord Jesus tells the church the basic steps of church discipline:

*<sup>15</sup> "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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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."*

Jesus sets forth a four step process for church discipline: 1) individual private confrontation, 2) confrontation in the presence of 2 or more witnesses, 3) report of the

transgression and transgressor to the church and disciplinary response by the church, and 4) withdrawal of fellowship.

In summary, the primary goal of church discipline is restoration – not to throw people out of the church, not to embarrass people and not to exercise authority or power in some unbiblical way. Therefore, appropriate confidentiality in the early steps is important and the circle of people involved should be as small as possible for as long as possible. Church discipline in the life of Providence Baptist Church should follow the steps outlined below. Except in extenuating circumstances, the process should be followed with faithfulness and an expectation of the Holy Spirit to work through God’s intended means.

## **II. CHURCH DISCIPLINE PROCESS**

### **A. INDIVIDUAL CONFRONTATION (Step 1)**

According to Matthew 18:15, the first step of discipline is for the offender to be confronted about their offense individually. In every case where a member has been wronged by another member, the offended member is required by Scripture to confront the offender, unless it is an offense that can be overlooked (Proverbs 19:11). If the member has not first confronted the offending member individually, prior to reporting to an Elder or Pastor, the reporting member will be first required to confront the offending member privately. If the situation is too volatile to allow a one-on-one confrontation, then designees of the Elders (Pastor, Elder or Deacon) shall be requested to accompany the offended member. If the offender confesses, asks forgiveness of the offended party(ies) and forsakes his sin, then further discipline should not be necessary.

### **B. GROUP CONFRONTATION (Step 2)**

If the offender refuses to repent in response to individual confrontation, the offended member, in accordance with Matthew 18:16 should involve one or two other church members to approach the offender. This is both to reflect a more serious level of concern to the offender and also to confirm every charge by two or three witnesses (2 Corinthians 13:1). These other witnesses may also discern that the offended member is not being unreasonable. This provides some protection for all parties, including the alleged offender. Other church members who might serve in this capacity could be Pastors, Elders, Deacons, LIFE Class Leaders or other ministry leaders. Depending on the responsiveness of the offender, multiple meetings and various approaches may be appropriate to encourage the offender to repent.

If the offender continues to refuse to repent and the matter is too serious to overlook, it should be referred to a Pastor or Elder for consideration of formal church discipline.

### **C. DISCIPLINE BY THE CHURCH THROUGH THE ELDERS (Steps 3 and 4)**

If the preceding steps of reconciliation have failed, in accordance with Matthew 18:17, the offender and the offense are then reported to the Elders as representatives of the Church (**Step 3**).

1. Behavior Subject To Discipline

Any action or behavior by a member of Providence Baptist Church which is a flagrant contradiction of the teaching of Scripture<sup>2</sup>, or an egregious, habitual sin<sup>3</sup> is subject to church discipline.

2. Initiation Of Discipline Process

Note: Repentance, as determined by the Elders, at any step in the discipline process prior to removal from membership, shall end the Church discipline process.

If the person reporting an offense was simply identifying a situation that may exist in which discipline may be necessary, then the Elder or Pastor must decide if further inquiry is necessary. To initiate the discipline process, the Elder or Pastor will review with the Elders the information and determine whether to refer the matter for investigation. The notifying person need not be the one who was wronged, or a member of the Church. The person, if a member, is told by the Elder or Pastor to carefully and prayerfully consider the allegation, to go to the offending member first, and to remember that should the allegation be unsubstantiated, then they might be subject to discipline for slander.

If it is determined that inquiry is appropriate, an investigation will be initiated in a non-judgmental, prayerful and open-minded manner to determine wrongdoing or to exonerate the accused, before proceeding further with the church discipline process.

3. Selection Of Disciplinary Panel

The Elders shall select a Disciplinary Panel, which shall consist of church leaders and members considered appropriate by the Elders. Generally, such Panel would consist of 3 members, including at least a Pastor, or an Elder, and one or two other members, such as a Deacon, LIFE class leader, ministry leader or other person deemed appropriate by the Elders. The Elders should also appoint a Panel leader to be the primary interface with the Elders. If a woman is the subject of church discipline, the Disciplinary Panel should include at least one woman member. Assigned Elder members may be any ordained Elder – actively serving or non-active Elders.

4. Disciplinary Panel Process

When a matter has been referred to a Disciplinary Panel, then the Panel will seek to meet with the offender to hear their story and to encourage repentance where

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<sup>2</sup> Rejecting an essential doctrine of the Christian faith

<sup>3</sup> Sin of an outward, visible nature that violates the moral, or ethical, or legal standards of the Scriptures (such as, but not limited to, sexual immorality in any of its forms, illegal or unethical business practices, contentious or divisive conduct, abusive behavior, or other actions deemed to be harmful to the name and testimony of Jesus Christ).

appropriate. If Group Confrontation from Step B above has not taken place, then the Disciplinary Panel should serve in this capacity and go with the wronged person and confront the offender. If the offender repents, then further discipline should not be necessary.

If further investigation is necessary, then the Disciplinary Panel shall investigate, take evidence in whatever form it deems appropriate, and further confront the offender.

If the offender is not willing to repent, but agrees to counseling or other appropriate remedies, then the Panel shall designate appropriate individuals to work with the offender and specify appropriate conditions. If no resolution is reached through the mediation within a reasonable time (generally no more than 3 months), then the Disciplinary Panel shall recommend an appropriate response to the Elders.

Contact with the offender should be by any and all appropriate means, including personal contact (visit, phone, email, text, etc.) and postal mail. If the offender is unresponsive to the attempts by the Disciplinary Panel, then letters on behalf of the Elders sent by postal mail with return receipt should be used. Unresponsiveness of the offender to the Panel will be evaluated in the Panel's recommendation to the Elders.

In identifying an appropriate response, the Disciplinary Panel should consider the specific nature of the sin, in light of biblical authority. The Disciplinary Panel shall recommend an appropriate disciplinary action and provide any supporting evidence to the Elders for approval and implementation. Such disciplinary action may range from a lesser action, such as a form of probational membership where certain membership privileges are withheld (which may or may not be communicated to the Church), all the way to full discipline—removing the offender from Church membership as described in Section III.D.6 of our Bylaws.

#### 5. Offender Appeal Process

The offender shall be given an opportunity to present any appropriate evidence or argument he/she deems helpful. The Disciplinary Panel shall have the opportunity to reply to the presentation of the offender.

Those desiring to address the Elders shall present to the Chairman of the Elders at least 48 hours before the Elders' meeting, a summary of the proposed presentation. The Chairman shall have the authority to rule upon whether any evidence or argument is inappropriate, and shall establish appropriate time frames and format for the presentations.

#### 6. Elder Actions

Should the Elders approve further disciplinary action, then the identity of the offender and the offense shall be set forth at a regular business meeting of the

Church (**Step 3**). Such discipline should be added to the agenda and that portion of the meeting should be reserved for church members only. The Chairman of the Elders, or his designee, shall announce that, should the offender refuse to repent during a specified 30 day period, then he or she will be removed from Church membership (**Step 4**). This time provides a last chance for the congregation to minister to, and pray for the offender, and restore them before fellowship is broken (1 Corinthians 5:4-5).

If the offending member repents, as determined by the Elders, within the specified 30 day period, then the discipline process is ended and the Chairman of the Elders or his designee announces (or appears with the offending member) at an evening worship service and the next regular business meeting of the Church that repentance has occurred. However, if the member is removed from membership in the Church, this action will be communicated to the Church by the Elders at the next business meeting of the Church.

In **Step 4**, when the offender is removed from membership, Matthew 18:17b instructs the church to “let them be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” The term “Gentile” was primarily used to refer to non-Jews who were considered pagans and had no part of the covenant, worship or social life of the Jews. However, a “tax collector” was often considered a traitor to his own people and was an outcast from the Jews by his actions. Jesus’ use of these terms does not mean that the church is to treat these people badly. But they are to be treated as those outside the fellowship – who don’t identify with the church’s beliefs. Thus, they are not allowed to share in all the blessings and benefits of the church. For example, they would not be welcome to participate in the Lord’s Supper. Also participation in various fellowship or ministry aspects of the church may be withheld as determined appropriate by the Elders. Such actions are not done to punish the offender, but to seek to awaken him or her to consider the cost of their sin. Therefore, such break in fellowship should be done prayerfully and in humility and love but never with a spirit of self-righteousness. The church should pray for the offender as one in need of salvation, but also as one who has rejected the obedience required by the faith. Contacts with the offender should include loving encouragement to repent, to admonish and to point them to the Gospel.

#### 7. Persistence of Church Discipline

The final steps (**Steps 3 and 4** - Disciplinary Panel involvement and intervention by the Elders) cannot be circumvented by the offender voluntarily withdrawing or transferring membership since the offense occurred during their time as a member and is subject to the disciplinary action of the Church. Furthermore, the congregation must be given an opportunity to minister to the member for restoration (see 1 Corinthians 5:1-13). This step is vital to the health of our Church given the impossibility of staying abreast of the activities of other members. The membership must be made aware of members who have seriously stumbled and failed to repent and if necessary, when Church fellowship may be withdrawn.

The Church shall report any ongoing, unresolved or unfavorable discipline proceeding to any church to which a member seeks to transfer membership.

8. Addressing Public Offenses – Alternative Discipline Procedure

As an alternative to the discipline procedure described above, any public offense, as determined by the Elders, may require public confession of repentance at a regular business meeting of the Church.

9. Restoration To Membership And Fellowship

Any person who has been removed from membership through the discipline procedure, who repents of the previously unresolved sin, and desires again to become a member, must consult the Elders. With the concurrence of the Elders, the person can apply for membership as any other new member. In celebration of such repentance, the Chairman of the Elders or his designee should announce (or appear with the offending member) at an evening worship service and the next regular business meeting of the Church that repentance has occurred and encourage the congregation to embrace the restored member.

### **III. PROCESS FOR ADDRESSING TROUBLED MARRIAGES**

#### **A. OVERVIEW**

In our culture, both married couples and the church must fight for the preservation of marriage. Many of the restraints that in the past have helped hold couples to the marriage covenant as they worked to overcome their differences are now ineffective. As a result, divorce rates in the church are approaching those of the non-believing culture. Therefore, this section offers specific guidance for providing help and support to couples dealing with marriage issues.

Matters of divorce for unbiblical reasons have accounted for much of the church discipline actions and initiatives of Providence over the years. Divorce is never commanded or desired in Scripture. However, the Bible does offer two situations whereby divorce is permitted. One is allowed by Jesus in cases where a spouse has been sexually unfaithful physically through acts such as adultery, homosexuality, bestiality and incest (Matthew 5:32, 19:9; 1 Corinthians 5:1). A second situation in which divorce is permitted is abandonment of the marriage by a non-believing spouse who leaves the marriage (1 Corinthians 7:12-15). These are the only reasons that Scripture provides for divorce. Spousal abuse is not identified in Scripture as a permitted basis for divorce. However, such egregious sinful actions should be addressed through the normal church discipline process. Additionally, the abused spouse may be strongly encouraged to seek protection through local law enforcement authorities to prevent further abuse.

The church will seek to be proactive in helping couples work through any marital issues. Such help is encouraged and may be provided by a variety of resources. Marital counseling may be provided by church staff pastoral counselors or from Christian



counseling resources outside the church. Other marital help may include such approaches as mentoring, accountability to church leadership, and support groups for dealing with specific issues.

Unless the troubles become irreconcilable by either or both spouses, these concerns will not be viewed in the light of church discipline, but treated as matters in need of pastoral care.

## B. PROCESS FOR HELPING TROUBLED MARRIAGES

Awareness of a couple's marital trouble should initiate this process. When a couple recognizes their own need for help or when someone else recognizes a couple experiencing marital trouble, this should be reported to a Pastor, Elder or Deacon. This information should then be relayed to the Pastor, Care & Help Ministries for evaluation and determination of support. Timeliness is important to seek to engage the couple for help and encouragement before hearts become hardened and/or legal action is initiated.

Should either or both spouses in a troubled couple not engage with the support recommended by church leadership (Pastors or Elders) or if a couple has taken steps toward a legal separation without the concurrence of church leadership, then the couple should be brought under supervision of the Elders. Such supervision would be provided by a Marital Support Team to offer support and accountability to the couple to help them address the issues that have been divisive. This supervision would be considered a part of the church discipline process at **Step 2 or Step 3**, as appropriate. However, the focus of this supervision, as in any aspect of church discipline, is not punitive but corrective or restorative.

1. Selection of a Marital Support Team  
A Marital Support Team should consist of 3 to 6 members and may include both individuals and couples. If possible, the team would include members from the couple's circle of relationships who might be influential in encouraging and motivating the couple to work through their issues. This team might include Pastors, Elders, Deacons, LIFE Class Leaders, other ministry leaders or members at large, as appropriate. The Elders shall select or authorize such a team based on recommendation from the Pastoral staff. A Team Leader should be selected to be the primary interface with the appropriate Pastor or the Elders, as directed.
2. Couple Notification of a Marital Support Team  
The Elders shall notify the troubled couple of the concern and support of the church leadership and the establishment of a Marital Support Team. Such notification should also offer prayer support and supportive resources of the church.
3. Function of a Marital Support Team  
The Marital Support Team is to provide both encouragement and accountability to the troubled couple. This may be to engage the couple in routine contact to support them in pursuing helpful resources identified by the Pastoral staff or Care

- & Help Ministries. The Team's involvement may also identify a need for other resources or support. Accountability would be provided if the couple is taking the steps toward healing that have been requested. Reports of additional resource needs and/or status should be made to the appropriate Pastor or the Elders. The focus and efforts of this team are to help the troubled couple be restored and become healthy.
4. **Application of Church Discipline**  
Should the couple reject the recommendations for addressing their issues or pursue unacceptable legal action against the marriage, the Elders may then consider whether they now meet the criteria for formal church discipline proceedings, or instead be subject to temporary limits on their level of ministry involvement until the elders agree to lift some or all of those limits. In such cases, the Elders may appoint some or all of the Marital Support Team to a Disciplinary Panel in accordance with Section II.C.3 above.
  5. **Dissolving a Marital Support Team**  
With prayerful support and active engagement with a troubled couple, it is hopeful that they will respond to the love and support of the church and do the necessary work to restore their marriage. Such results should prompt celebration. With joyful gratitude, the Elders should commend the couple and dissolve the Marital Support Team. In the event their efforts are not successful, they will recommend to the Elders that the Marital Support team be dissolved.