

INTRODUCTION TO GUIDELINES FOR CHURCH DISCIPLINE

We believe that loving church discipline is one of the greatest blessings and privileges of belonging to a Christian church. The following Guidelines were developed to provide a clear biblical framework for carrying out church discipline.

The most important reason for spelling out the disciplinary process in such careful detail is to provide due process, which prevents the church from misusing its authority and insures that a person who has been accused of wrongdoing will be treated fairly. For example, under these guidelines, a person accused of an offense has the right to receive at least ten days notice before a hearing may be held to consider the charges against him. He also has the right to be accompanied by an advisor at all hearings. These rights serve to protect every person in the church from arbitrary actions and help to provide a process that will be just, constructive, and honoring to God.

As you read these guidelines, we encourage you to look up and study the Bible passages that are cited next to particular provisions. If such study does not answer all of your questions and concerns about our disciplinary policies, please do not hesitate to approach one of our elders, who will be happy to talk with you about these matters.



GUIDELINES FOR CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Church discipline shall be instituted according to these Bylaws.

Mutual accountability and discipline within the church is commanded by God in Scripture and is one of the most important responsibilities of a true church of Jesus Christ (see *Matt. 18:12-20; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; 6:14-16; Gal. 2:11-21; Eph. 5:11; 1 Thess. 5:14; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; 1 Tim. 1:20; 5:19-20; 6:3-5; 2 Tim. 3:1-5; Titus 3:10; Heb. 3:12-15; 10:24-30; 12:5-17; 2 Pet. 2:1-2; 1 John 4:1-3; 2 John 7-11; Jude 4, 8-23; Rev. 2:2-6, 14-16, 20; 3:19*).

Church (*ecclesiastical*) discipline is the exercise of that authority that the Lord Jesus Christ has committed to the visible church for the preservation of its purity, peace, and good order. All members of the church, both communicant and non-communicant, are under the care of and subject to the discipline of the church. The ultimate goal of all discipline is to train Christians to be self-disciplined so that they may share in the holiness of God (see *Heb. 12:7-13*).

Discipline may be either administrative or judicial. Administrative discipline is concerned with the maintenance of good order in the government of the church in other than judicial cases. Its purpose is to see that all rights are preserved and all obligations are fully discharged. Judicial discipline is concerned with the prevention and correction of offenses, an offense being defined **as** anything in the doctrine or practice of a member of the church that is contrary to the Word of God.

The purpose of judicial discipline is:

- 1.) To guard and preserve the honor of God (see *Rom. 2:24; 1 Cor. 10:31*);
- 2.) To protect the purity of the church and to guard other Christians from being tempted, misled, divided, or otherwise harmed (see *1 Cor. 5:6*);
- 3.) To restore fallen Christians to usefulness to God and fellowship with his church (see *Matt. 18:12-14; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; 7:8-10; Gal. 6:1-2*).

Discipline involves three components or phases:

- 1.) God commands Christians to make every effort, with his help, to discipline themselves and lead godly lives (see *Eph. 4:25 - 5:6; 2 Tim. 1:7; 2 Pet. 1:5-11*);
- 2.) If a Christian fails to discipline himself and is trapped in a sin, God commands other brothers and sisters in Christ to lovingly confront, counsel, and encourage him toward repentance (see *Bylaw §15.b; Matt. 18:15-16; Gal. 6:1-2; Col. 3:16; Heb. 10:24-25*);
- 3.) If these personal and informal efforts do not correct an offense, God commands the church leaders to intervene and exercise their ecclesiastical authority to resolve the matter, protect the church, and, if possible, restore the offender (see *Matt. 18:17-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Tim. 4:2; Heb. 13:17*).

This third phase, which may be referred to as judicial or formal discipline, involves a judicial proceeding (*trial*) before the Board of Elders. Such a trial shall be carried out according to the following procedures, which are designed to provide due process for the offender and promote a just resolution.

When an offense is personal and known only to a few individuals, discipline may not be instituted until there has been a good faith effort to resolve the matter privately and informally (*see Bylaw §15.b*). No charge may be accepted if it is filed more than two years after the commission of the alleged offense, unless it appears that unavoidable impediments have prevented an earlier filing of the charge. Every charge must be submitted to the Board of Elders in writing. A person may be censured for filing a charge that the Board of Elders determines to be without merit (*see Deut. 19:16-21*).

An offense that is serious enough to warrant judicial discipline and a trial is:

- 1.) An offense in the area of conduct and practice that seriously disturbs the peace, purity, and/or unity of the church;
- 2.) An offense in the area of doctrine for a member that would constitute a denial of a credible profession of faith as reflected in his membership vows.

When the Board of Elders convenes to determine whether an offense has occurred and to administer censure, it shall be referred to as a "judicatory."

Just as a good shepherd will go after a sheep that has wandered from the flock (*Matt. 18:12-14; Ezek. 34:4,8,16*), so shall the elders and members of this church seek to restore a wandering member to the Lord through biblical discipline. Therefore, discipline may be instituted or continued either before or after a member attempts to withdraw from membership.

A person accused of an offense shall be given a written citation to appear before the judicatory at a specific time and place. The citation may, but need not, specify the charges and specifications that have been brought against the accused. Ordinarily all citations shall be served in person, but in case that is not possible, citations shall be sent by certified mail to the person cited.

At the first meeting of the judicatory only these actions may be taken:

- 1.) The charges and specifications shall be read and formally presented to the accused together with the names of any witnesses and copies of any documents that may be presented against him;
- 2.) The judicatory shall fix the time, date, and place for a second meeting of the judicatory, which shall not be less than ten days later, and shall issue citations directing all persons to appear at that time whose presence it may deem necessary;
- 3.) The accused shall be granted citations in which he may insert the names of the witnesses whom he wishes the judicatory to summon.

If **an accused refuses** or fails to appear without satisfactory reason for his absence at the time appointed for the trial of the case, he shall again be cited, with the warning that, if he does not appear, the judicatory will proceed with the trial in his absence. The time allowed for

the appearance on citation shall be determined by the judicatory with due consideration for the circumstances. If the accused still refuses or fails to appear, the trial may proceed in his absence. When proceeding in the absence of the accused, the judicatory shall appoint counsel for the accused, who shall present a case to the judicatory in defense of the accused. Such counsel shall be entitled to present evidence, interview witnesses, interpose objections, and otherwise act in defense of the accused.

If unusual circumstances require it, a judicatory may deny an accused person the right of participating in the Lord's Supper, or of performing the functions of his office, until a case is concluded.

If the accused appears at the second meeting of the judicatory, he shall be called to plead "guilty" or "not guilty" to the charges. If he pleads "not guilty," the judicatory shall proceed to receive evidence. The judicatory shall ordinarily sit with open doors, and must do so when hearing a charge of heresy. No person shall be deprived of the right to set forth, plead, or offer into evidence the provisions of the Word of God or of the subordinate standards. If subsequent meetings of the judicatory are required, the accused and all witnesses shall be cited to appear as provided above.

The accused shall be entitled to assistance of counsel. No person shall be eligible to act as counsel who is not a member in good standing of the church or does not affirm the statement of faith of this church. The accused shall be allowed one copy of the minutes at the expense of the judicatory.

Any person may be a witness in a judicial case if the judicatory is satisfied that he has sufficient competence to make the following affirmation, which is required of all witnesses: "I solemnly affirm that by the grace of God I will speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth concerning the matters on which I am called to testify."

Evidence must be factual in nature. It may be direct or circumstantial. Caution should be exercised in giving weight to evidence that is purely circumstantial. The accused may object to the competency of any witness and to the authenticity, admissibility, and relevancy of any testimony or evidence produced in support of the charge and specifications. The judicatory shall decide on all such objections after allowing the accused to be heard in support thereof. The testimony of one witness shall be insufficient to establish the truth of any specification. If the accused so requests, no witness, unless a member of the judicatory, shall testify in the presence of another witness who is to testify concerning the same specification.

At the conclusion of the trial, the accused may make a final argument with respect to the evidence and the law of the church. The judicatory, after deliberation, shall vote on each charge and each specification separately. If the judicatory decides that the accused is guilty, it shall proceed to determine the censure.

If a person who has been adjudged guilty refuses or fails to present himself for censure at the time appointed, the judicatory shall cite him to appear at another time. If he does not appear after this citation, the censure may be pronounced in his absence.

The following censures may be pronounced by the judicatory:

- 1.) **Admonition** consists in tenderly and solemnly confronting the offender with his sin, warning him of his danger, and exhorting him to repentance and to greater fidelity to the Lord Jesus Christ.
- 2.) **Rebuke** is a form of censure more severe than admonition. It consists in setting forth the serious character of the offense, reproving the offender, and exhorting him to repentance and to more perfect fidelity to the Lord Jesus Christ.
- 3.) **Suspension** is a form of discipline by which one is deprived of the privileges of membership in the church, of office, or of both. It may be for a definite or indefinite time. An officer or other member of the church, while under suspension, shall be the object of deep solicitude and earnest dealing from the Board of Elders and the church to the end that he may be restored.
- 4.) **Deposition** is a form of censure more severe than suspension. It consists of a solemn declaration by the judicatory that the offender is no longer an officer of the church.
- 5.) **Excommunication**, also referred to as disfellowshipping, is the most severe form of censure and is resorted to only in cases of offenses aggravated by persistent impenitence. It consists of a solemn declaration by a judicatory that the offender is no longer considered a member of this body of Christ.

Since the church is a body made up of many parts (*see 1 Cor. 12:12-30*), what happens to one member of the church necessarily affects and is of legitimate concern to other members (*see Rom. 12:15-16; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 12:12-30*). Therefore, the indefinite suspension, deposition, or excommunication of a member shall be announced to the church so that its members will be able to pray for, encourage, and exhort the accused as opportunities arise, as well as be on guard against any gossip or divisiveness that might arise from the offense or censure (*see 1 Cor. 5:9-11; 2 Thess. 3:6-14; Titus 3:10*). The public announcement of censure shall always be accompanied by prayer that God will graciously use the discipline for his own glory, the restoration of the offender, and the edification of the church. This announcement may be made during a regular worship service, at a special meeting of the congregation, or by letter.

If an accused leaves the church while under discipline, and if the Board of Elders learns that he is attending another church, the Board of Elders shall inform that church that the person is currently under church discipline and shall ask that church to encourage the person to be restored to the Lord and to this church. Such communications enhance the possibility that a person may finally repent of his sin, and, at the same time, serve to warn the other church to be on guard against the harm that the accused might do to their members (*see Matt. 18:12-14; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Thess. 3:6-14; 2 Tim. 1:15; 2:16-18; 4:9, 14-15; 3 John 9-10*).

If a person who has been censured through suspension, deposition, or excommunication comes to repentance, the church shall warmly and lovingly restore him to fellowship within the body (see *Matt. 18:13; Luke 15:11-32*). Once the Board of Elders is persuaded that the person has sincerely confessed his wrongs and sought forgiveness from God and the person or persons he offended, it shall announce his restoration. That announcement shall be accompanied by a solemn admonition to the congregation that the restored person's offenses have been forgiven and are not to be held against him or otherwise hinder his fellowship within the church (see *2 Cor. 2:5-11*). When deemed appropriate by the Board of Elders, however, the restored person may be restricted from certain responsibilities within the church until he has demonstrated the requisite qualities for those responsibilities (see, e.g., *1 Tim. 3:2, 8; Titus 1:6*).

GEORGETOWN CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP