

Refuge Consent to Shepherd

The Purpose of Church Discipline

The elders of Refuge take the role of shepherd very seriously. With Jesus as our Chief-Shepherd, God has given pastors to the church as imperfect - yet Spirit-filled - under-shepherds. Godly leaders are a gift to the church for her guidance, encouragement, protection, growth, and care. One of the ways the elders are called to provide this care is through the practice of church discipline.

All of the Christian life is repentance. Church discipline is a process designed to help a Christian who cannot or will not repent return to Jesus as their only hope and true identity. *Repentance* is the supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit in the lives of God's people to move their desires away from rebellion and wickedness and toward worship and righteousness. Repentance looks at both the heart and actions, but it only looks at actions in so far as they are the battlefield where the issues of the heart come to light. This means that many sinful actions will never warrant formal discipline since the believer is actively fighting for faith within the context of an honest community. This also means that many "harmless" sins can become occasions for formal church discipline if they provide a window into a heart that is determined to be hard, rebellious, and resistant to calls for repentance. The entire discipline process is aimed at answering the question: *Has this person repented? However imperfectly, are they fighting for faith in Jesus?* If so, the process ends. They will still need ongoing encouragement, support, and teaching. But the prodigal has returned, the crisis has passed, our brother has been won!

Kinds of Discipline

The Holy Spirit is the only one who can produce repentance in the human heart. The elders cannot do it. Following a process cannot do it. This means that any discipline should be carried out with hope and constant prayer. The Scriptures give clear commands regarding how ongoing unrepentance or gross sin should be handled. Church discipline does not replace the Holy Spirit, but when done in faith and love it is where He has promised He will intervene for the good of His people.

The bible teaches that church discipline can be both **formative** and **corrective**. The goal of church discipline is never to be solely *punitive* toward the disciplined individual, but rather it is aimed at the *restoration* of the believer by returning them from the path of death to the path of life. The goal of all church discipline is 3-fold:

- the spiritual health of the individual being disciplined
- the preservation of the doctrinal purity of the church
- the preservation of the unity of the church

Formative discipline is almost always informal and is constantly happening all around us. It entails the everyday encouragements, gentle reminders, and course corrections needed to continue in a life of faith and repentance. Examples of formative discipline could include:

- conversations in gospel community groups
- spiritual conversations with other members
- listening to sermons

- bible studies with other believers

Corrective discipline becomes necessary when the minor course corrections of formative discipline become ineffective in the life of a believer. Corrective discipline can begin informally but can become formal if repentance is not reached after a length of time. Some examples of informal corrective discipline could include:

- One on one discipleship or accountability with a member of Refuge
- Bringing your sin to your GC for ongoing encouragement and prayer
- Receiving counseling from a Refuge member, leader, or Christian counselor

The goal at each step is for the believer to turn from sin and renew their trust in Jesus. When the informal avenues of discipline do not lead to repentance, it becomes necessary to pursue *formal corrective discipline*. This may include some or all of the following:

- Meeting with the elders of Refuge to discuss the sin and condition of your heart
- Agreeing to see a Christian counselor upon the recommendation of the elders
- Agreeing to enter into an intensive mentoring/discipleship relationship with a mature member
- Agreeing to provide regular (monthly) status updates regarding your struggle with sin

“Tell it to the church”: Why and How

When even these measures fail to produce repentance, it may become necessary to *publicly take the issue before the membership* of Refuge. This painful step requires great wisdom and care on the part of the elders. In the majority of cases this step is reserved for cases where the individual has been encouraged toward repentance over a number of formal and informal meetings, spanning a number of weeks or months. If, after repeated attempts to “win the brother back” the elders determine that the individual is **continuing in persistent, unrepentant sin** the eldership of Refuge will inform the membership of the situation. This may include making certain private details public if the eldership deems this information helpful and necessary in understanding the scope of sin or the actions required from the membership of Refuge. Any person consenting to membership at Refuge Church is acknowledging that they have *no expectation of complete confidentiality*. The elders take confidentiality very seriously and will never abuse confidences, however in some church discipline cases it may become necessary to make private information public with great care and discretion.

Notifying the membership of an instance of church discipline could take the form of:

- An email to all current members
- An announcement at a regularly scheduled, or specially called members meeting

The notification would consist of:

- Stating the name of the individual under discipline
- A general description of the sin and the situation leading to discipline
- A general explanation of the steps leading up to the public notification of members

- A notice from the elders announcing the intention to remove the individual from membership in the next 30 days if they continue in unrepentance
- A recommendation from the elders regarding how the membership is encouraged to interact with the individual under discipline (pursue, encourage, plead, avoid, etc.)

In the event that an individual is brought publicly before the church and refuses to repent, they will be removed from membership after 30 days unless otherwise specified. Then, depending on the nature of the situation they may either be permitted to continue attending Refuge as an unbeliever or in some cases may be completely banned from attending Refuge.

Atypical Cases

The steps outlined above reflect the general course of action outlined in Scripture. However, some cases require more immediate action.

Gross Sin

In cases where gross sin has been committed, it may be necessary to bring some details of the situation to the church immediately. Examples of these kinds of situations could include:

- When a leader publicly sins in a way that is damaging to the church or the name of Jesus
- Heinous sins that imply extreme premeditation, deceit, or spiritual numbness
- Sins that present a real and immediate risk to the safety of Refuge members

In these cases, it may be necessary to withhold the “benefit of the doubt” and to take action quickly to protect the spiritual and physical safety of the church and its membership. Even in these cases the person being disciplined is not to be ostracized but loved.

Division

Jesus tells us that the onlooking world will know we are Christians by our love for one another. This means that our greatest witness to God’s goodness and glory is our unity. If the elders determine that a member is intentionally attacking this unity by building alliances or causing factions it may be necessary, for the good of the body, to remove that person immediately. In this case, the elders will continue to work with the individual, but will need to monitor their interactions with other members.

False Teaching

False teaching is the most damaging thing a person can do to a body of believers. Wrong understanding is part of the normal Christian life and God has given us the tools to combat it - regular teaching/preaching, humble reflection, and prayer. However, false teaching implies an *intentional attack* against the very pillars of our faith with a *desire to entice others into error*. If it becomes evident that a member is involved in false teaching the elders will act quickly to correct the error publicly, warn the membership about the individual and their teaching, and remove the individual from membership.

Retraction of Membership

It is not uncommon for someone under church discipline to bristle at having their sin exposed. They will often feel “called to another church” or will drop out of church completely. It is the conviction of the elders that leadership’s role in church discipline has not ended at this point. Rather, these actions prove that the member is indeed running from God and community and needs to be pursued.

Therefore, an individual may not terminate their membership while involved in a church discipline process. Should the member become unresponsive during the discipline process, the elders, after a reasonable amount of time and at least 2 attempts to make contact with the individual, will take the matter before the church. If the member chooses to attend another church during a disciplinary process, or after being removed from membership, the eldership will make the circumstances of the disciplinary process known to the leadership of the other church.

If during the discipline process the individual determines that they are not a Christian, the elders will cease the discipline process, which is reserved for Christians, and will make known to the membership that during the course of church discipline the individual chose to withdraw their Christian confession and will be removed from membership.

Restoration: Our Prayer and His Promise

It is difficult to expose sin, die to ourselves, follow Christ, and entrust ourselves to a larger community. While extremely difficult at times, church discipline is intended to be healing and restorative. God has given the Church the tools of discipline and correction as a means of working his grace into the lives of his people. God disciplines those he loves and commands that his Church do the same. This gives us hope that this difficult process can actually work! Believers who are stuck in sin will actually turn back! God will not abandon his own - and correction is one of the ways he has promised his presence with us. This means that every step of the way the people of God are called to love, weep, and pray for our unrepentant brothers and sisters will full confidence that He who began a good work in them will be faithful to complete it.

I understand Refuge's beliefs and practices regarding church discipline and submit myself to the authority of the elders as they attempt to faithfully shepherd Refuge with love, wisdom, and care.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Printed Name: _____