



Restoring Erring Christians

Our Purpose

This paper presents the teaching position of the Elders of Grace Baptist Church regarding the loving discipline and restoration of fellow-believers. Included also are the strategy and specific steps that make up the restorative process.

An Understanding

We believe that the church — the Body of Christ — is ultimately made up of all those who are indwelt by the Spirit of God. We also believe that, as much as possible, each local church should be representative of Christ's true church. While we recognize that no local church will be absolutely pure, we do strive to maintain a believing membership. Accordingly, we admit to membership only those whose lives evidence their profession of faith in Christ.

Sadly, we recognize that within the family of Grace Baptist, there will be times when each of us will sin (1 John 1:5–10). When sinful activity is not repented of, it becomes a serious threat to the spiritual health of the individual and eventually the church. God's Word demands that those in the Body come alongside the one in sin out of love for them and the church.

Following Scriptural guidelines, they must act to:

- Impress upon him or her the danger their sin represents for themselves, and the lives around them.
- Show him or her the damage their sin brings to their relationship with Christ and His church.
- Lovingly encourage him or her to seek genuine repentance, and the forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration that will follow.
- Persistently walk along side him or her through dangerous times with a consistent message that repentance will bring restoration, healing, and the blessing of God.

Within the local church setting, we recognize the Scriptural instructions of a loving discipline process that leads to restoration is intended for church members; however, it is our desire to care well for everyone who calls Grace Baptist their local church. Therefore, we will be proactive in loving care and discipline in the lives of all whom actively participate in Grace Baptist Church.

Our Definitions

Church Member

Those who have successfully completed the classes leading to membership, have given credible, verbal testimony to their faith, been baptized, and have been affirmed by the membership of Grace Baptist Church are considered members of the Grace Baptist family.

Sin

Sin is understood as any breaking of God's law. We sin when we fail to do what God commands, or do that which He forbids. While all sin needs to be acknowledged and repented of, it is important to recognize that the process of official church discipline is not set in motion by every sin committed by those who claim to follow Jesus Christ. Consequently, the Grace Baptist leadership will work to apply Godly wisdom as to when the seriousness of perpetual sin most merits the discipline and restoration process. In the history of the church, sins such as sexual immorality, and destructive, physical violence have been addressed through this process.

Repentance

Repentance is that attitude of the heart, and action of the will whereby a person turns from acknowledged sin, to pursue righteousness before a holy God. This is described in 1 Thessalonians 1:9: “... *how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God.*” A wonderful, practical example of this process is seen in the life of the Prodigal Son, whose story was related by Jesus in Luke 15. In verses 17–19 we see that he “came to his senses”, realized the reality of his sinful attitudes and behaviors, determined that the responsibility was fully his own, and set about not only to stop sinning, but to rectify the situation in great humility. His concern was not to regain position or prestige, but simply to re-establish authentic relationship through humble admission of his sin before his father. This simple story provides a good paradigm for assessing true repentance.

It is also important to understand that true repentance is granted by God through the work of the Holy Spirit in an individual's life (2 Timothy 2:24–26). Therefore, it is our intention to exhort those who are pursuing the path of sin to pray for true repentance, asking God to open their eyes and soften their hearts. This will be our constant prayer as well.

Restoration

The goal of church discipline is the restoration of the erring brother or sister to loving fellowship with the Savior and the church family. Restoration follows, and is conditioned on, their sincere repentance. Even though restoration involves the complete forgiveness of sin, the consequence of their sin may require a change in future service or leadership. It is also recognized that, where appropriate, a heart of restitution on the part of the repentant offender will be a required element in the process of restoration. It must always be kept in mind that the whole focus of the discipline process is the full restoration of the sinning person to the love and fellowship of the Body of Christ.

Our Process

At Grace Baptist, we follow the paradigm given by our Lord in Matthew 18:15–17 whenever it is deemed that official discipline is needed to bring about restoration of a sinning brother or sister:

Step One

When a brother or sister is found to be in need of discipline, he or she is to be confronted privately in an attitude of love and genuine concern. With repentance and restoration as the goal, this must always be accompanied by persistence in prayer. The text certainly allows for several attempts to bring about righteous change in the offending brother or sister before moving on to the next step. If God does grant repentance, the matter is completed, and there is great rejoicing. If there is no repentance, the process proceeds to Step Two.

Step Two

The sinning brother or sister is now confronted by a group of two or three. Presumably, these people have been witnesses to the sin. It should also be those in relationship with him or her. There is no time limit on this step, nor are there a set number of times that the offender is to be confronted by this group of concerned brothers or sisters. A heart of love and a desire for restoration will mean that this step will include many attempts to turn the sinner's heart, much prayer, and a strategy of great care and concern for the offending brother or sister. As repentance is gained, the matter is completed, again with great joy. If there is no repentance, the process proceeds to Step Three.

Step Three

At this point, the matter is to be taken “to the church.” Prior to proceeding to step three, the Elder Team, as those held responsible by Christ to shepherd the souls of the congregation, needs to be informed.

At Grace Baptist, we understand “the church” as used by Jesus prior to Pentecost as that group of Christ-followers forming the community to which the offending person fellowships. This group, “the church,” would know the offender, and therefore be in a position to understand the offense, observe the process of attempted restoration, encourage the offender to repentance and righteousness, and, if necessary, be party to the reduction in relationship with the offender brought about by a failure to repent.

It is also our view that the position of the offender in the Grace Baptist family, along with the public nature and effects of their sin, will help determine the scope of those who need to be informed in step three. It is necessary to inform all those who may be impacted by un-repented sin, as well as those who will be responsible to carry out the dictates of step four, if necessary.

The clear hope is that the participation now of “the church” will be used of the Holy Spirit to bring true repentance and restoration to the offending sinner. The text says that the offender needs to “listen to the church.” This demonstrates that now “the church” is called upon to entreat the offender, offering a loving yet courageous opposition to their sinful behavior, calling them to repentance, and offering full reconciliation and restoration of relationship. It is crucial that the Elder Team lead well in the facilitation of the process at this point and beyond.

It is not clear how long the process may remain at step three. Again, a heart that is passionate for restoration will not rush to the next step.

Step Four

The text declares that the sinning person who has shunned biblical correction and instruction, and has by so doing given evidence that it is not their desire to order their lives according to the law of God, should now be classed and treated as an unbeliever.

This will include official notification that he or she is no longer a welcomed participant in the life of the church. They will not be admitted to the Lord's Supper, or offered any of the assurances and benefits extended to those in the family of God (see: 1 Corinthians 5:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6ff). At this point, the relationship between Grace Baptist, its family, and the offender has been drastically reduced. In most cases, the offender will be seen as an unregenerate person in need of saving grace, and allowed to attend the preaching services in hopes that the Spirit will use the Word to effect repentance and faith. If their offense is such that their very presence presents physical or theological harm to the Grace Baptist family, they may even be prevented from attending services and other meetings.

In some cases, the offender will be classed as a heretic, and prevented from attending or having influence among the congregation. In a few cases, the offender may be seen as an apostate, and an intentional enemy to the church, prevented from attending, and the church family will be warned to stay away from them in all instances.