

Church Discipline

Written by Eric Shuster

Founder and Executive Director of the Foundation for Christian Studies



When a member of the Lord's Church commits a serious transgression the Lord's objective is to teach the offender repentance in the gospel of Jesus Christ, to help that individual realize the Atonement in their life, and to render just discipline. When this discipline takes place there are specific blessings that are suspended to the member in order to help facilitate the repentance and healing process, leading to an eventual restoration of those blessings in the future when appropriate and possible.

Forgiveness and Love is the Overriding Principle

The Lord has commanded, "Wherefore, I say unto you, that ye ought to forgive one another; for he that forgiveth not his brother his trespasses standeth condemned before the Lord; for there remaineth in him the greater sin. "I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men" (D&C 64:9–10).

Disciplinary Councils are for Serious Sins

When an individual confesses a serious transgression to their ecclesiastical leader (a bishop for example)—often in the form of sexual sin, a civil crime, abuse, apostasy, or some other like serious sin—it should result in the holding of a confidential disciplinary council. The council is held in the spirit of love and seeking the Lord's will for the individual, making possible a spiritual judgment that will allow the offender to rid him or herself of the sin, feel the peace of forgiveness, and become eligible for the blessings of exaltation.

The process of disciplinary councils is simple, highly confidential, and can render either informal or formal discipline, depending on the severity, frequency, and circumstances of the transgression. In some cases there may not be a need for a disciplinary council at all, as the matter may be worked out between the individual and their ecclesiastical leader.

The Rendering of Informal Discipline

In the case of informal discipline a member who has committed a less serious sin may be simply counseled by their leader, or through inspiration may be put under some form of probation. There may be some restrictions placed on the individual such as refraining from taking the sacrament, restrictions on callings, or the temporary surrendering of other spiritual privileges. There will likely be specific actions identified for improvement so that the offending individual has a clear idea of what they need to do and accomplish in the repentance process. The ecclesiastical leader alone decides when to terminate the probation.

The Rendering of More Formal Discipline

When ecclesiastical leaders are inspired to render discipline in a more formal manner, usually for more serious transgressions, a disciplinary council is held. This is especially the case when the transgressor holds the Melchizedek Priesthood. The process of disciplinary councils is documented in detail in D&C 102. There are three main purposes of a disciplinary council: to save the soul of the transgressor; to protect the innocent; and to protect the Church's name and integrity. Concern and care of the individual is always kept in mind out of love for God's children; however, the other two purposes must always be considered due to their critical importance.

Serious Transgressions Requiring Formal Discipline

The most likely reasons for a formal disciplinary council may include, but are not limited to: sexual transgression (including incest), murder, or apostasy; when a prominent Church leader falls into serious transgression; when the transgressor is thought to be a predatory threat to others; when the transgressor demonstrates a frequency of transgressions; when the public is aware of the

transgressors actions; or when the transgressor is guilty of false and deceptive practices and/or fraud.

Other infractions that may convene a disciplinary council may include: abortion, transsexual operation, attempted murder, rape, forcible sexual abuse, intentionally inflicting serious physical injuries on others, adultery, fornication, homosexual relations, child abuse (sexual or physical), spouse abuse, deliberate abandonment of family responsibilities, robbery, burglary, embezzlement, theft, sale of illegal drugs, fraud, perjury, or false swearing (see M. Russell Ballard, “A Chance to Start Over: Church Disciplinary Councils and the Restoration of Blessings,” *Ensign*, Sep 1990, 12). It is important to note that civil court decisions do not affect decisions made in a disciplinary council, but may help Church leaders decide whether or not a disciplinary council should be held.

Matters that are not appropriate for disciplinary councils, or even a confession to an ecclesiastical leader, include issues with the Word of Wisdom; non-attendance at Church; the inability to pay tithing; the joining of another church, or financial failings (bankruptcy, business failure, etc.)—provided no improprieties were committed.

Possible Outcomes of Disciplinary Councils

There are generally four possible outcomes of a formal disciplinary council including no action to be taken, formal probation, disfellowshipment, or excommunication.

Formal Probation

In the case of formal probation, discipline is rendered commensurate with the infraction according to the inspiration of the presiding officer. Probation is usually short term and often includes ecclesiastical leaders meeting regularly with the transgressor to listen, provide counsel and encouragement, and to track progress.

Disfellowshipment

Disfellowshipment is temporary and allows the individual to retain their membership; however, the period of disfellowshipment depends upon the actions of the transgressor. Those who are disfellowshipped are urged to attend Sunday Church meetings, but must refrain from taking the sacrament, offering public prayers, or speaking

in a Church forum. Those who are disfellowshipped cannot hold Church callings, must relinquish their temple recommend, cannot sustain Church officers by way of voting, and cannot exercise the priesthood if they are priesthood holders. Such individuals are still allowed to pay tithing and wear temple garments (if endowed).

Excommunication

If excommunication is rendered the transgressor loses their Church membership and are denied the blessings and privileges of Church membership. Excommunicated individuals are urged to attend Church meetings, but cannot pay tithing, wear the temple garment, partake of the sacrament, pray publicly, or speak in Church forums.

Confidentiality is always a priority in the execution of disciplinary councils. The decisions of councils are never made public and kept confidential between Church leaders, the council, and the transgressor.

Focusing on the Atonement of Jesus Christ

In all cases of Church discipline, the transgressor is encouraged to carefully and prayerfully go through all of the steps of repentance (starting with achieving godly sorrow). Individuals are likely to have regular meetings with Church leaders to ensure progress is being made and have the opportunity to minister and counsel together, offering encouragement to the individual. In some cases specific individuals will be assigned in confidence to fellowship the individual. In the Lord’s Church, when discipline is rendered the objective is to help the transgressor feel and experience the Atonement of the Savior and to bring to life the process of repentance. It is not easy, nor is it meant to be easy; however, it is meant to be spiritually meaningful and valuable to the individual.

Paul in his second epistle to the Corinthians, chapter 7 verse 10 says: “For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.” Feeling godly sorrow is essential to the process of repentance. For most humans it is not enough to admonish them and set them free as a consequence of their sin. Much more can and must be done to help individuals understand and feel the Atonement of Christ.

A Testimony of the Church Discipline Process

From Elder Ballard's article quoted earlier comes the following passage from a Church member who had experienced the process of church discipline: "The shock I felt was terrible. I could feel the spirit of concerned brethren in the room as I was told the decision of the council... I felt only love and compassion. Left to cope with the anguish and grief inside me, I cried, I prayed, I lay awake at night afraid that I would lose my wife and children forever. Although I continued to counsel with my bishop, I felt alone, with rebellion in my heart many times and feelings of guilt because of this rebellion. ...As I look back now, working through each personal challenge was terribly difficult but necessary, and the whole process was a great blessing to me. ... Repentance is something that each individual must find for himself or herself, in process of time" (M. Russell Ballard, "A Chance to Start Over: Church Disciplinary Councils and the Restoration of Blessings," Ensign, Sep 1990).

This story is consistent with those of individuals whom I am personally associated with who have gone through a similar process. I have been involved with individuals who were excommunicated and were re-baptized into full membership and the joy of the occasion for their entire family. It truly is a process of love that comes about under the stern hand of a loving Heavenly Father.

I have come to learn through my own ecclesiastical leadership experiences that the purpose of church discipline is to help the offending member to truly feel godly sorrow, experience the Atonement, and facilitate the process of repentance.

Reinstating the Disciplined Individual

When the time for reinstatement arrives, as dictated to Church leaders through the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, councils may be reconvened to discuss and consider the matter as was done in the original disciplinary council. In the case of reinstating those given probation or disfellowshipment, no additional actions are required—it is typically a day of great joy and happiness for the individual and their family. In the case of those excommunicated, the transgressor who is found worthy for reinstatement is re-baptized, and a process is begun to

restore priesthood and temple blessings as appropriate for priesthood holders. For those who are excommunicated the process of reinstatement can be long and difficult; however, to come into the light and feel the full impact of the Atonement of Christ in one's life is powerful and worth the wait and anguish.

Conclusion

I believe strongly in the church discipline process as the way the Lord would want his church to operate and his children to be counseled during times of indiscretion and serious sin. Serious sin must be met with serious consequences in order to bring the reality of the Atonement of Jesus Christ to those who need it most. An active church disciplinary process facilitates repentance and brings to life the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the redeeming power of his ultimate act of love for all mankind.

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