

Toward a Holy Church: Dealing with Sin & Error



Elder Council Position Paper

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Introduction

How can a church promote good Christian behavior and retard the growth of sin, doctrinal error, and conflict? The short answer: The church can't do it. It is the exclusive prerogative of the Holy Spirit to accomplish this task in the lives of Christians. Still, a church can formulate and enact policies that are designed to participate with the Holy Spirit in His mission and to be in right alignment with His purposes. Ideally, such a policy would be scriptural, workable, sustainable, and transferable. It would be easy to understand, yet flexible in its application. And wherever people experience broken relationships with God or each other because of sin or error, the goal of the church is to encourage reconciliation, restoration, and unity.

The function of this document is to provide general guidance to the Elder Council and to HHBC. It is based upon biblical references. But since our ultimate authority is the Bible, any conflict or ambiguity that might arise from this document should be considered in deference to the Bible.

Definitions

For the purposes of this paper:

Concern—a sin, doctrinal error, or conflict.

Sin—that which does not comply with God's Moral and Spiritual Law, whether that sin is accidental or on purpose, by thought or by deed, by what is done (commission) or by what is left undone (omission).

Doctrinal Error—is not something about which Christians may reasonably disagree but a deviation from foundational and essential Christian truth.

Conflict—a sharp disagreement. A conflict can occur without a sin or doctrinal error (for example, two Christians could have sharp theological disagreement over free will and sovereign grace without committing a sin or doctrinal Error), but over time, most

conflicts produce sin. An example of sin committed in conflicts are “sins against you,” mentioned in many later Scripture manuscripts as part of Matthew 18:15.

Matthew 18: Yes & No

This policy follows the broad outline of Matthew 18—*but only in its general structure*; that is, we recommend that when the church deals with a concern (a sin, doctrinal error, or conflict), that it does so one on one, and then in groups of three or four. By this point, the concern will most likely be resolved so that it would never come to the attention of the Elder Council.

In formulating this policy we explicitly reject the way Matthew 18 is often misinterpreted and misapplied in church culture. Matthew 18 is often ignored, or perhaps worse, used as a club to bludgeon people out of the church. When a church misunderstands this biblical passage, it can potentially create legalism, judgmentalism, and a spiritual smugness among its members. We maintain that the New Testament writers did not think of Matthew 18 strictly in terms of a formal or judicial process (though admittedly there are some judicial elements for a few people in the later stages of discipline), but rather a loving, nurturing, and informal process filled with forbearance, forgiveness, and grace.

According to Kevin Harney in his book, *Leadership from the Inside Out*, the ultimate purpose of Matthew 18:15-17 is not ex-communication. He writes:

Too often church leaders have read these words as a call to exclude people, drive them away, or cut them off from fellowship. I believe this is wrong. How did Jesus treat tax collectors and sinners? Did he exclude them? Did he hate them? Did he cast them out? No! Jesus shared meals with them, he loved them, and he reached out to them with compassion and tenderness. Jesus calls the church to treat those who refuse reconciliation as if they need the love, grace, and power we can bring into their lives. We are to seek to win them to the heart of Jesus through loving and consistent prayer, service, and keeping the door open for reconciliation.¹

Check Your Heart

Before a Christian approaches a brother or sister who may be involved in a concern, he or she must consider whether it is wisest and best to approach the fellow Christian at all (Matthew 7:1-5; Luke 6:37). What is the evidence that a fellow believer is involved in a Concern? Is the approaching Christian responding to mere gossip or hearsay? It is best if the approaching Christian has witnessed the concern for himself or herself so that Christians can avoid slandering one another.

Also, what are the approaching Christian's motives? Without the right spirit and motives such an approach might do more harm than good. It is true that God desires that Christians strive for purity. Still, all Christians sin from time to time, so we can't expect sinless perfection from anyone, let alone every person in the church. As James notes, "we all stumble in many ways" (James 3:2), and John adds, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Therefore, the motive of the approaching Christian should never be one of superiority or vengeance but simply of love and concern for a brother or sister in Christ. Christians should note that they themselves can also be tempted in this process:

Galatians 6:1: Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

The Concern Ends Here

For each of the following steps, it is assumed that the concern will be resolved and that the next step will not be necessary. Steps 1, 2, and 3 should be considered informal and normative, that is, forbearance and forgiveness, and education and admonition should occur between fellow Christians regularly as a matter of course (James 5:19). And at this point, any Christian may discuss any concern with the Christian who may have stumbled.

Steps one, two, and three may each need to be repeated regularly and often even for the same concern (Matthew 18:22; Luke 17:3-4). Any action beyond Step 3 should be unusual because the concern should normally have been resolved at some point during the first three steps.

Step 1: Forbear and Forgive

When a Christian sees a concern in a fellow Christian, the first response should be to consider Forbearance and Forgiveness. In this case, the only thing required on the part of the Approaching Christian is to intercede with God privately in prayer. The Christian who may have committed the Concern should not know about this intercession.

Forgive (Greek: **χαρίζομαι** *charizoma*)—to forgive means “to be gracious” or “to give freely.” It is sometimes used to mean “to cancel a debt” (Lawrence O. Richards). It is often used in the New Testament simply as our English notion of “to forgive” or “to pardon” even “to graciously restore one to another” or “to preserve for one a person in peril” (Strong). The idea is that forgiveness is not done begrudgingly but with a free and open spirit of love and tenderness. How often shall we forgive? In Matthew 18:22 Jesus said we are to forgive not just seven times (as Peter suggested), but “seventy times seven,” meaning countless times.

Forbear (Greek: **ἀνέχομαι** *anechoma*)—To forbear means “to sustain,” “to bear” or “to endure.” In the New Testament it is translated “suffer” seven times, “bear with” four times, “forbear” twice, and “endure” twice (Strong). This word does “not imply passivity” but “inspired by hope the believer finds an inner strength that enables one to hold up under persecutions and hardship” (*Endure*, Lawrence O. Richard). The idea here is that the Christian has been affected deeply by another person, perhaps hurt, devastated, or even crushed, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, or all of the above. But the Christian response is not hatred, anger, bitterness, or revenge, but self-sacrificial endurance.

Proverbs 19:11: Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.

Colossians 3:12-13: Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Galatians 6:2: Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Step 2: Educate and/or Admonish

The approaching Christian may feel prompted by the Holy Spirit to talk informally with the Christian who may have committed the concern. It is important at this point for the approaching Christian to check his or her own heart to make sure as far as possible that he or she is proceeding with the right spirit and motive and not a spirit of self-will, judgmentalism, or revenge.

1 Thessalonians 5:15: See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

As Jesus points out in Matthew, many times the approaching Christian is smitten with greater sins than the Christian he or she is accusing; such accusations then become a kind of hypocrisy:

Matthew 7: 1-5: Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Again, only the Holy Spirit has the power to convict people of a concern; it is not a mere human function (John 16:8-11). But the Holy Spirit sometimes enlists people to serve Him as He convicts people's hearts. If the approaching Christian feels the Holy Spirit is

so prompting him or her to speak with the Christian who may have committed a Concern, this discussion could include attempts to educate and/or admonish.

Educate—Education can simply be defined as moving someone from a lack of knowledge and understanding to a position of knowledge and understanding. It is often a dialogue. This step includes such biblical concepts as teaching in righteousness, correction, discipleship, and nurture (2 Timothy 3:16-17). This step by its very nature is a process that will likely take a good deal of time and patience.

Admonish (Greek: **νουθετέω** *noutheteo*)—Admonition is when a Christian gently teaches another by warning or advising through warmth, closeness, encouragement, and exhortation “stimulated by a deep love.” “There is no hint of a distant judgmentalism or criticism launched from some height of supposed superiority” (Lawrence O. Richards).

Colossians 3:16a: Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom.

1 Thessalonians 5:12: We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.

As Calvin notes in his *Institutes*:

If any one does not do his duty spontaneously, or behaves insolently, or lives not quite honestly, or commits something worthy of blame, he must allow himself to be admonished; and every one must study to admonish his brother when the case requires.

Step 3: Educate and/or Admonish in a Group of Three to Four

Three or four Christians get together in an informal meeting. In a typical situation, these people might be comprised of an approaching Christian, the Christian for which there may be a concern, and one or two intercessor Christians.

The point of this step is again to express love and concern for a brother or sister in Christ. The idea is based upon Matthew 18:16 where the purpose seems to be to establish that there really is some sort of concern and not merely a miscommunication. This step can also provide a great deal of spiritual wisdom, counsel, perspective, mediation, and encouragement. If there is doctrinal error, these meetings reinforce orthodoxy by demonstrating that the two diverse views are not a mere a matter of opinion.

Step 4: Take it to the Elders²

At this point, the process becomes more formalized and judicial for the first time as someone involved in Step 3 contacts one or more elders. A charge should be brought directly to the elder team specially commissioned to consider such issues (for example, the “Discipline and Restoration Team”). If the charge is brought to an elder who is not on the designated team, that elder should refer the matter to the designated team and then keep the matter confidential. The elders have the discretion to expedite their decision as they see fit, proceeding in a manner and at a pace that is most appropriate to the case at hand, but using these procedures as a guideline:

Procedure 1: Check the Steps. When the designated elder team first hears of a charge involving some concern, they should first make sure that Steps 1, 2, and 3 have been followed when appropriate.³

Procedure 2: Classify the Concern. The elder(s) commissioned to consider the concern should classify it into one of two categories: (1) A conflict between Christians in the church (possibly including private “sins against you”), or (2) a sin or doctrinal error. This classification process is important because the two types of concerns will likely require two different types of treatment throughout however far the process continues. For example, doctrinal errors might perhaps be assigned to the Elder Council’s “Ministry of the Word Team,” whereas conflicts might be assigned to the Elder Council’s “Discipline and Restoration Team.”

Procedure 3: Investigate the Concern. Using discretion and diplomacy, the elder(s) should talk with the people involved in the first three steps. The elders should assume innocence on the part of the Christian with the alleged concern unless there is documented evidence or good testimony.

Procedure 4: Respond to the Concern. When the elders respond to a concern, they should consider starting in the most gentle manner (forbearance and forgiveness) and proceed to less gentle manners only when necessary. Again, these responses may need to be repeated a number of times. Gentleness and patience should be the norm. Elders should have the flexibility to respond in a manner appropriate to the situation, focusing upon what would best bring about repentance, reconciliation, and restoration and also the protection of the church. As a part of their decision, the elders may decide it is appropriate (even though it is not required) to make some or all of the matter public to the church in whole or in part whether in oral or a written form, or both. Here is a list of possible responses available to the elders:

1) Forgive and/or Forbear—Who forgives and forbears whom here? It depends upon the circumstances. The elders themselves may have to be the ones who must forgive and/or forbear, or they may decide to take no more formal action than to encourage the approaching Christian and/or the Christian charged with the concern to forgive and/or forbear.

2) Educate and/or Admonish—The elders may decide that their only formal action is to continue to educate and/or admonish the Christian charged with the concern. For example, if a person were to hold a particular doctrinal error to be the truth, and yet promise never to try to win fellow Christians to adopt this position, the elders may decide the best thing would be to continue to educate and/or admonish the erring Christian with right doctrine.

3) Rebuke—This is the step that crosses the line from mere teaching and correction into formal “Discipline.” It can only be performed by the Elder Council as a whole, rather than by a team. Rebuke (Greek: **ἐλέγχω** *elegcho*) means “to convict, refute, confute . . . generally with a suggestion of shame of the person convicted . . . to reprehend severely, chide, admonish, reprove . . . to call to account, show one his fault, demand an explanation . . . to chasten, to

punish” (Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon, 1996). This is much harsher than the gentle warning-teaching of admonition; it is a formal judgment on the part of the Elder Council rather than strong brotherly advice.

4) Ex-Koinonia or Ex-Communication⁴—These two responses should be taken only after due deliberation, and presumably as a last resort after other gentler options have been considered.

“Ex-Koinonia” can be defined as a limiting of fellowship within the church and can include actions such as prohibiting the partaking of the Lord’s Supper, prohibiting some leadership role in the church, prohibiting the attendance of FLOCKS, or whatever might be wise and appropriate to bring about repentance, restoration, and reconciliation as well as the protection of the church.⁵

“Ex-Communication” can be defined as expulsion from the church. This action is designated only for church members, and only as a last resort. Again, even this ultimate response is to bring about repentance, restoration, and reconciliation.⁶

Applying ex-koinonia or ex-communication to a Christian who has involved in a *conflict with another Christian*: Conflicts can vary widely by type and must be handled on an individual basis. A conflict might or might not be “publicly known” and might or might not be “potentially harmful to the church at large,” so it should be in a separate category from a “sin or doctrinal error,” which we will discuss next. In general, however, the conflict between Christians must rise to a high level—in the judgment of the Elder Council—before the Elders consider as strong a corrective action as ex-koinonia and/or ex-communication.

Applying Ex-Koinonia or Ex-Communication to a Christian who has committed a *sin or doctrinal error*: The Elders may apply the correctives of ex-koinonia and/or ex-communication to a Christian who has committed a sin or doctrinal error as long as it meets all three of the following conditions in the judgment of the Elder Council:⁷

1. **The Sin or Error is Publicly Known**⁸—at least to some significant segment of the church.

2. **The Sin or Error is Potentially Harmful to HHBC at Large.**⁹

3. **The Sin or Error is Unrepented**—the person committing the sin or doctrinal error has refused to repent and is likely to some degree in a state of rebellion.

A person who sins in gluttony, for example, might be “publicly known” because of the obvious ramifications on his or her body, but such a sin would not necessarily be “harmful to the church at large.”

What about Deacons & Elders?

Deacons and elders are subject to the same process as any other church member but have an even higher standard to meet, which are the qualifications designated for them in Scriptures. The qualifications for elders and deacons are enumerated in 1 Timothy 3:1–12. In addition to these, elders must also meet the qualifications enumerated in Titus 1:5–9 and 1 Peter 5:1–3.

Charges Against Elders—Because elders are leaders of the church, they may be more likely to be attacked with spurious charges. So before the designated sub-team of the Elder Council begins investigating the accused elder, the charge must be established by two or three witnesses. If the investigating team determines that the elder has indeed committed a concern, they may decide that the best method of correction is (a) forbearance and/or forgiveness, and/or (b) education and/or admonition; if so, they may keep the matter private. But if the concern is significant, and if the accused elder is still persisting in the concern, then the sub-team of investigators must make public to the whole Council both the concern and their recommendation (which could include rebuke, ex-koinonia, or ex-communication).

1 Timothy 5:19-20: Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.

Ex-Koinonia for Deacons and Elders—A possible form of ex-koinonia for deacons and elders is to be removed from office. Deacons and elders may be removed from

their ordained offices through the vote of the Elder Council and affirmation by the church body. The Elder Council may require a man to step away from his service as a deacon or an elder for a period of time (referred to as a “leave of absence”) until the concern can be investigated. Deacons or elders may choose to go on a “sabbatical” at any time; this is a completely voluntary action on the part of the deacon or elder and should not be confused with a “leave of absence” or elder deliberation. Elders may decide it is appropriate (even though it is not required) to make some or all of the matters relating to deacons and elders public to the church in whole or in part whether in an oral or a written form, or both.

Notes

¹ Harney, K. (2007). *Leadership from the Inside Out*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

² Our Elder Council has traditionally interpreted the phrase in Matthew 18:17 “tell it to the church” as meaning “tell it to [the Elders of] the church.”

³ An example of when it would be inappropriate would be in charges such as alleged sexual misconduct where it would obviously not be advisable for the alleged victim to meet one on one with the alleged assailant.

⁴ “Ex-Communication” as we define it is merely expulsion from Henderson Hills Baptist Church. It should be considered clearly distinct (and even has a different spelling) from “Excommunication,” which in some denominations suggests a person’s soul is liable to eternal damnation. We take no authority upon ourselves to “Excommunicate” in the latter sense.

⁵ John Calvin in his *Institutes* argues for a method of correction that limits church fellowship (his specific example is to deny the Lord’s Supper). For his thoughts, see the addendum to this endnote in Appendix 2. R.C. Sproul in *The Reformation Study Bible* also argues that limiting fellowship through denying the Lord’s Supper is an appropriate method of correction prior to considering Ex-Communication: “Church censures may have to escalate from admonition through exclusion from the Lord’s Supper to expulsion from the congregation . . . , which is described as handing a person over to Satan, the prince of this world (Matt. 18:15–17; 1 Cor. 5:1–5, 11; 1 Tim. 1:20; Titus 3:10, 11).”

⁶ John Calvin in his *Institutes* urges Christians in the church to be gracious, hopeful, and prayerful toward those who have been expelled from the church. For his thoughts, see the Addendum to this footnote in Appendix 2.

⁷ These three conditions were formulated by analyzing a number of New Testament passages where a specific sin is linked to a specific response to that sin. See Appendix 1.

⁸ John Calvin in his *Institutes* argues that private sins are to be treated more gently and more covertly than public sins. For his thoughts, see the Addendum to this endnote in Appendix 2.

⁹ John Calvin in his *Institutes* argues that the greater sins (presumably sins which would do more damage to the church) should receive harsher methods of correction. For his thoughts, see the Addendum to this footnote in Appendix 2.

Appendix 1: New Testament Sins Linked to a Specific Response

Below are listed a number of New Testament passages where a specific sin is linked to a specific response to that sin. Allen Rice compiled this list based solely off of Wally Weaver's distribution of the 1999 "Restoration and Reconciliation" document (complete with Wally's insertion of the full text of relevant Bible verses).

Sins

- If your brother sins ["Against You"]

Heresy or Blasphemy

- If anyone does not obey what Paul states in the letter

- Those who reject faith and a good conscience and therefore "made shipwreck of their faith"

- Anyone who does not bring [right] teaching

Divisiveness

- Those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to [right] doctrine

- A person who stirs up division

Response

- "Let him be to you a Gentile and a tax collector" (Matt 18:15-20).

- "Have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother" (2Thessalonians 3:14-15)

- "I [Paul] have handed [them] over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme" (1 Timothy 1:19-20).

- "Do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting" (2 John 9-11).

- "Avoid them" (Romans 16:17)

- Warn him twice then "have nothing more to do with him" (Titus 3:10)

Other Sins

- A man has his father's wife
 - "Let him . . . be removed from among you" (1 Cor. 5:1-5) "You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh."

- Any brother walking in idleness
Sexual Immorality, greed, an idolater,
reviler, drunkard, or swindler
 - "We command you . . . that you keep away [from him]"
(2 Thessalonians 3:6-10).

 - "I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty" [of these sins].
"Purge the evil person from among you" (1 Cor. 5:11-13).

Appendix 2: John Calvin on Church Discipline

Addendum to Endnote 5 — John Calvin on a Method of Correction that Limits Church Fellowship— Ex-Koinonia — (in this case, the Lord’s Supper):

It is not sufficient verbally to rebuke him who, by some open act of evil example, has grievously offended the Church; but he ought for a time to be denied the communion of the Supper, until he gives proof of repentance This was the method observed by the ancient and purer Church, when legitimate government was in vigour. When any one was guilty of some flagrant iniquity, and thereby caused scandal, he was first ordered to abstain from participation in the sacred Supper, and thereafter to humble himself before God, and testify his penitence before the Church.

Addendum to Endnote 6 — John Calvin urges Christians in the Church to be Gracious, Hopeful, and Prayerful toward those Who Have Been Expelled from the Church

The whole body of the Church [is] required to act thus mildly, and not to carry their rigour against those who have lapsed to an extreme, but rather to act charitably towards them, according to the precept of Paul, so every private individual ought proportionately to accommodate himself to this clemency and humanity. Such as have, therefore, been expelled from the Church, it belongs not to us to expunge from the number of the elect, or to despair of, as if they were already lost. We may lawfully judge them aliens from the Church, and so aliens from Christ, but only during the time of their excommunication. If then, also, they give greater evidence of petulance than of humility, still let us commit them to the judgment of the Lord, hoping better of them in future than we see at present, and not ceasing to pray to God for them.

Addendum to Endnote 8 — John Calvin argues that private sins are to be treated more gently and more covertly than public sins:

But as our Saviour is not there speaking of secret faults merely, we must attend to the distinction that some sins are private, others public or openly manifest. Of the former, Christ says to every private individual, “go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone” (Mt. 18:15). Of open sins Paul says to Timothy, “Those that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear” (1 Tim. 5:20). Our Saviour had previously used the words, “If thy brother shall trespass against thee” This clause, unless you would be captious, you cannot understand otherwise than, If this happens *in a manner known to yourself*, others not being privy to it. The injunction which Paul gave to Timothy to rebuke those openly who sin openly, he himself followed with Peter (Gal. 2:14). For when Peter sinned so as to give public offence, he did not admonish him apart, but brought him forward in face of the Church. The legitimate course, therefore, will be to proceed in correcting secret faults by the steps mentioned by Christ, and in open sins, accompanied with public scandal, to proceed at once to solemn correction by the Church

And, first, let us remember the division above laid down, that some sins are public, others private or secret. Public are those which are done not before one or two witnesses, but openly, and to the offence of the whole Church. By secret, I mean not such as are altogether concealed from men, such as those of hypocrites (for these fall not under the judgment of the Church), but those of an intermediate description, which are not without witnesses, and yet are not public. The former class requires not the different steps which Christ enumerates; but whenever anything of the kind occurs, the Church ought to do her duty by summoning the offender, and correcting him according to his fault. In the second class, the matter comes not before the Church, unless there is contumacy, according to the rule of Christ. In taking cognisance of offences, it is necessary to attend to the distinction between delinquencies and flagrant iniquities.

Addendum to Endnote 9— John Calvin on the Greater Sins Receiving the Harsher Methods of Correction:

Another distinction to be attended to is, that some sins are mere delinquencies, others crimes and flagrant iniquities. In correcting the latter, it is necessary to employ not only admonition or rebuke, but a sharper remedy, as Paul shows when he not only verbally rebukes the incestuous Corinthian, but punishes him with excommunication, as soon as he was informed of his crime (1 Cor. 5:4) In lighter offences there is not so much occasion for severity, but verbal chastisement is sufficient, and that gentle and fatherly, so as not to exasperate or confound the offender, but to bring him back to himself, so that he may rather rejoice than be grieved at the correction. Flagrant iniquities require a sharper remedy.⁹