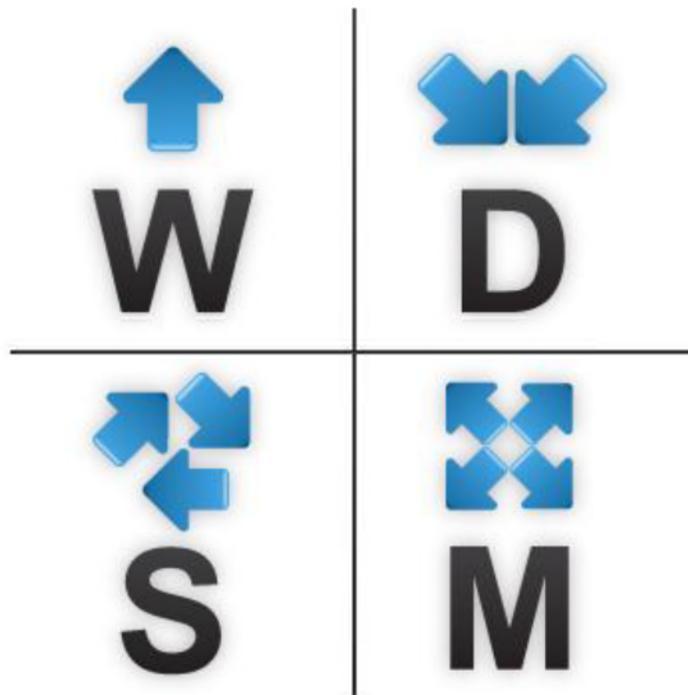


Position Papers of the Grace Fellowship Church of Waterloo, Iowa



Grace Fellowship Church exists to glorify God through worship, discipleship, service, and mission.

INTRODUCTION TO GRACE FELLOWSHIP POSITION DOCUMENT

This document contains the position statements of the Grace Fellowship Church of Waterloo, Iowa. They concern areas where Christian churches often differ in outlook and serve to define not only the position of the Waterloo Grace Fellowship Church in these areas, but also how this position will be interpreted as it affects body life of the church. While not required to personally agree with these positions as individual members of the church body, all are expected abide by the positions described within.

Respectfully serving the church for God’s Glory,

The Elder Board of the Grace Fellowship Church of Waterloo, Iowa

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Divorce and Remarriage.....	3
Forgiveness.....	9
Membership and Accountability.....	13

POSITION PAPERS.

POSITION - DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE.

GBC Divorce & Remarriage Policy

There are few topics as deeply personal and painful as divorce. Nearly everyone has been affected in some way by divorce, be it in our own marriage, the marriage of our parents, or among those who are our close friends and family. It is prevalent within our society today, as no-fault divorce has allowed the dissolution of marriage to become commonplace. As a result, it's important that we as Christians carefully consider what Scripture has to say in order that we might respond to this issue not according to worldly wisdom but in accordance with the Word of God. Admittedly, this policy paper is not an exhaustive study of the matter, but is rather as short overview of the relevant passages with the goal of providing direction for how we're to approach questions of divorce and remarriage here at GFC.

Biblical Passages

We wish to begin by considering a number of Scripture passages that address the matter of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. The most logical place to begin is with marriage itself by considering God's intention for the covenant of marriage.

God's Intention for Marriage

Let's begin at the beginning and consider what God says regarding marriage in the opening chapters of the book of Genesis. In Genesis 1:27 it says,

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

Twice this passage mentions that mankind was created in “the image of God.” While all the implications of what that means is not spelled out here, nevertheless one clear implication is made by virtue of the Hebrew parallelism in this verse. To be created in the image of God is parallel with “male and female” at the end of the verse. The diversity of our gender is part of how we reflect God's image. But in order to unpack that further, we need to consider the first marriage as recorded in Genesis 2:24, which says,

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”

In marriage, two people of different genders (male and female) become “one flesh” through the covenant of marriage. We believe this reflects the image of God in man by reflecting God's Trinitarian nature: just as God is Three in One – three distinct Persons who are different yet are equally God and united by love – so also are we to reflect God's nature when two persons (one male, one female) who are equally human, come together and become “one flesh” in marriage. As a result of this, marriage must be limited only to two persons of different genders, since having two men or two women united by marriage would misrepresent the image of God in man, implying there is no distinction between the Persons of the Trinity. Since the Father, the Son,

and the Holy Spirit are each different Persons (yet equally fully God), so also in marriage must two persons of different genders (but equally fully human) be united by love and become one flesh within the covenant of marriage.

Yet besides marriage serving as a reflection of the image of God, the apostle Paul in the New Testament provides another image that marriage is meant to convey. In Ephesians 5 he writes,

“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Paul tells us here that marriage is meant to picture Christ’s love for the church. In marriage, the wife pictures the church’s role in submission to Christ’s authority, and the husband pictures the love of Christ for his bride, the church, by lovingly and sacrificially giving of himself for her. As a result, marriage pictures both God’s divine Trinitarian nature and his divine love as expressed in Christ’s loving sacrifice for the church. Once we comprehend this, we can understand what why God feels the way he does about divorce in Malachi 2:16:

“‘I hate divorce,’ says the Lord God of Israel, ‘and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,’ says the Lord Almighty.”

The reason ultimately that God hates divorce is it misrepresents him. If marriage is intended to be a reflection of his eternal Trinitarian love between the Persons of the Godhead, then divorce is a gross misrepresentation, implying as it were that the Son might leave the Father or the Spirit would terminate the eternal bond of love and unity he has between the Father and the Son. Furthermore, if marriage is to reflect Christ’s love for the church, then divorce creates a picture of Christ’s abandoning his church, forsaking his love for his chosen people. Since God is rightfully jealous over his own glory, he must of necessity be angry toward anything that would rob him of his glory by misrepresenting him in some way. Since divorce does just that, God therefore hates it.

Regulations for Divorce & Remarriage

Having laid out this foundation of God’s intention for marriage, we need to now turn to what Scripture prescribes regarding divorce and remarriage. Although it is without a doubt God’s

intention that marriage last a lifetime, in his grace he also allows for divorce and remarriage in certain circumstances. Two passages in particular speak to these situations. The first is found in Matthew 19:3-9,

“And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, ‘Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?’ He answered, ‘Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.’ They said to him, ‘Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?’ He said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.’”

Here (and also in Matthew 5), Jesus affirms the passage in Genesis 2, reminding his listeners that marriage is to be a lifelong union, but nevertheless allows for divorce and remarriage in cases where sexual immorality (i.e. adultery) is involved. In such a situation, one can pursue divorce (although divorce is not required) and be remarried without being guilty of adultery.

A second exception is made by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7. He writes,

“To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.”

In agreement with the rest of Scripture, Paul endorses a lifelong union between a husband and wife, commanding that those who are married should not get divorced, and if they are, should either be reconciled to their spouse or remain unmarried. But Paul brings up a situation where a believer is married to an unbeliever and the unbelieving spouse wishes to leave. In such a case, the believing spouse is not “enslaved,” i.e. he is not required to try to keep the marriage together; he is free to allow the unbelieving spouse to go and would also presumably then be free to be remarried.

The Role of Church

An oft-overlooked element of biblical teaching on divorce is the role of the church. Those who get married are eager to be married in a church by a pastor, yet ironically when they decide to end the marriage they leave the church completely out of it. We have allowed the church the role of authority in creating the marriage but have excluded it from the dissolution of marriage. This should not be. Instead, Scripture speaks of the role the church should have regarding the

questions of divorce and remarriage of its members. The first passage that applies is found in 1 Corinthians 6:1-8,

“When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against brother and that before unbelievers? To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud - even your own brothers!”

Before going to a divorce lawyer, a Christian couple should come before the church. The church is to be involved in helping to settle disputes between believers, including such things as marital problems. We should not be allowing these matters to be settled by lawyers when the church is competent to help address these issues.

Furthermore, we believe Matthew 18 has direct application to the church’s involvement in questions of divorce and remarriage,

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

When one spouse is sinning against another spouse, the church should be involved in both comforting in love and convicting with the truth. Much healing and restitution can come through the loving yet firm involvement of fellow believers who are willing to listen, teach, correct, and rebuke as necessary. The church has a vital role to play both at the start of a marriage and when the termination of the marriage is being considered. While this is not always possible in the case when one spouse is an unbeliever, the involvement of the church should be central to any Christian couple who is contemplating divorce.

Implications for Grace Fellowship Church

In light of the teaching of God’s Word, we at GFC have come to the following conclusions:

1. We believe marriage is meant to be a life-long union between one man and one woman. While it is meant to promote personal happiness or create a loving environment for the raising of children, it has a higher goal of reflecting the image of God both in terms of God's Trinitarian nature and Christ's love for the church. Thus in light of its God-glorifying role, every couple should strive to faithfully honor their marriage vows, both out of a love for their spouse as well out of a love for God.
2. We believe the church has an essential role in helping sustain marriages. Out of desire to live in submission to church elders and to prevent God's name from being dishonored among outsiders, we ask that members first seek counsel within the church for troubled marriages. Every effort should be made to resolve differences within the marriage through the help of the church.
3. While we affirm God's desire for all marriages to be life-long unions of committed love, we also recognize that God in his mercy has given provisions for the dissolution of marriage. Although allowance for divorce and remarriage are given in Scripture, we believe these are not requirements and that each spouse should exhaust every option available to him or her to bring about healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation before considering divorce.
4. In a situation of marital unfaithfulness, where one spouse has been involved in illicit sexual activity with someone who is not his or her spouse, we believe it is permissible for the spouse who was sinned against to get a divorce and be remarried.
5. In a situation where an unbeliever has separated from his or her believing spouse, we believe the believing spouse is free to remarry.
6. In circumstances that do not involve adultery or abandonment, we will carefully consider each situation in light of compassion and mercy for those involved.
7. Those that pursue divorce apart from biblical exceptions listed above may be subject to church discipline.
8. In cases where one has been divorced on unbiblical grounds, we believe every effort should be made to seek reconciliation with one's former spouse.
9. If one has subsequently re-married after a divorce, that individual should remain faithful to his or her current spouse.
10. If one has been divorced on unbiblical grounds, we believe they should pursue singleness. Nevertheless, compassion and mercy may allow for remarriage in certain situations (e.g. Paul says it is better to marry than to burn with lust in 1 Corinthians 7:9).

Responsibility: Elder Board
Chairman: Brad Morris
Date approved: August 15, 2017

POSITION – FORGIVENESS.

BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES FOR RESTORATION

The New Testament clearly teaches the concepts of mutual accountability and loving confrontation in a local church setting. See: Matthew 18:15-17; Gal. 6:1; Hebrews 3:13; 10:23-25. The principles listed below are designed to equip believers in the restoration of a brother who has been ambushed and taken captive by sin.

The Steps To Restoration

Step one is to help the person *recognize the failure and the consequences of a wrongful decision*. It is important to understand that the problem in this instance is not a slight miscue or a momentary lapse. Rather, it is a sin in the sight of the Lord. More often than not, the individual knows that he/she has sinned, but still lives under sin's power. Much like David, the person must be willing to say to God, "I have sinned and done what is evil in Thy sight" (Psalm 51:4).

Step two is to help the person *accept responsibility for the sin*. Granted, helping a brother assume personal responsibility for his sinful actions is often difficult. Yet it is a very necessary step. A classic Old Testament example here is Saul, Israel's first king. Again and again Saul tried to dodge responsibility. When Samuel confronted him with his failure to utterly destroy the Amalekites, Saul responded, "But the people took some of the spoil, sheep, and oxen" (I Samuel 15:21).

The next step is to lead the person to *honestly confess and repent of the sin*. Repentance, first of all, means a change of mind that results in a sense of deep regret and remorse. More importantly, genuine repentance also involves a deliberate change of behavior. The one who confesses and forsakes sin is the one who will find mercy (Prov. 28:13). This third step is crucial in redeeming the person for holy, fruitful living. True, forgiveness is abundantly available through the blood of Calvary. But until true repentance occurs, the individual's heart is not ready to receive its cleansing power.

Step four in the process involves *restitution*. Someone who steals something needs to pay it back. Someone who criticizes others in public needs to ask forgiveness of those persons who have been wronged. Granted, restitution cannot be made for some sins. For example, there is no redress for surrendering one's moral purity. Genuine confession and sincere repentance will have to *suffice in* these instances. Whenever possible, however, a sincere effort needs to be made to right the wrongs that have been done.

Step five involves helping a fallen brother *receive God's message through his failure*. Although God does not cause any one to fail, He can and does teach valuable lessons through our failures, lessons that keep us from wandering into similar harmful situations in the future. The Lord's reproofs in such instances are priceless. "He is on the way of life who heeds instruction, but he that forsakes reproof erreth" (Proverbs 10:17).

Finally, step six involves helping a person who has fallen to *respond to God's chastening with gratitude*. This too is a difficult step. Yet when a person understands God's intended purpose for necessary times of discipline, he can actually give thanks for the correction. David said it this way, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn Thy statutes. The Law of Thy mouth is better unto me than thousands of gold and silver" (Psalm 119:71-72). Bringing a sinning brother/sister to this point protects him/her against the insidious root of bitterness that can spring up in the aftermath of sin. See Heb. 12:15.

The Spirit Of Restoration

Our success, or failure, in restoring a fallen brother or sister is quite often determined by the manner in which we go about it. If so, how then are we to restore a sinning Christian? A clear answer to this question is given in Galatians 6:1:

"Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye who are spiritual restore such an one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted "

First of all, note that Paul says we are to approach a fallen brother "in the spirit of meekness (gentleness)." More than likely, the person's emotions at the time are as fragile as thin glass. Unduly harsh condemnation, therefore, only worsens the individual's plight. Understanding and acceptance are needed. This does not mean that we excuse the sin or that we ignore the place of chastening in the process of restoration. It is important to remember that chastening is God's responsibility, not ours.

Second, note that Paul says that we are to restore a fallen brother with a spirit of humility "considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted." In other words, what happened to the other person could very well happen to us. In short, we must help an individual to recognize the sin, assume responsibility, repent, make restitution when possible, receive gladly the message God is sending through the failure, and even thank Him for His loving discipline. When we attempt to restore in a fit of anger or with a passionate desire to defend the truth, we often further damage a sinning brother or sister. As well, we must be careful about our own fives, knowing that we too are vulnerable to all types of temptation and sin.

When Paul writes to the Galatians, "Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2), he adds a third dimension to the restoration process, namely the spirit of love. In a similar vein, Jesus said, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Again, He said, "This is My commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you" (John 15:12). To "bear one another's burdens" means that we are willing to get under the load with him. It means that we are willing to vicariously suffer what he/she is suffering, to some degree feel what he/she is feeling. And we are to do this with love.

Jesus' encounter with a woman caught in the sin of adultery reveals the folly of a condemning spirit rather than a loving spirit.

"And the Scribes and Pharisees brought unto Him a woman taken in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they say unto Him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. Now, Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned But what sayest Thou? This they said, testing Him, that they might have to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down, and with His finger wrote on the ground, as though He heard them not. " (John 8: 3-6)

What did Jesus write on the ground? No one really knows for sure. Some say He wrote out the Ten Commandments. Others say He singled out only the seventh commandment. Yet others say that Jesus produced the list of sins of those standing in the crowd. In any event, the Scripture continues,

"So when they continued asking Him, He lifted Himself up and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. "

Note, Jesus made no attempt to excuse this woman's sin, to defend the woman's actions before her pious, hypocritical accusers. Rather, He simply said, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." The Old Testament Law said that an adulteress was to be stoned to death. The leaders of Israel were prepared to do just

that. But when Jesus challenged anyone present who was not guilty to cast the first stone, one by one they departed from the scene. When confronted with the ugliness of their own sins, their guilt and shame drove them away.

These several verses make it clear that if we are to successfully restore a brother or sister in Christ, we must come in the same spirit of gentleness, humility, and love. Why? Because the Scripture plainly warns, "For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself" (Gal. 6:3). Successful restoration can never take place in a cavalier atmosphere. Admittedly, all of us are vulnerable. All of us still struggle with a principle of sin that lives on the inside of us. That is why each us is to "prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another" (Gal. 6:4).

When Leaders Stumble

Particularly damaging to the cause of Christ is the demise of a spiritual leader, one who has enjoyed visible influence before the world. When a spiritual leader falls, it should, therefore, send a warning signal to everyone. Likewise, it should be a call for self-examination. After all, if a man of stature can blunder and fail, are we, too, not subject to the same failures?

Tragically, however, the signal that is sent in such instances is one of self-deception. When a prominent figure falls, it often relieves the pressure from those who violate God's laws. Unbelieving men and women observe what has happen and rationalize, "See there, that man studies the Bible and preaches to others. If he can do that, then I'm not so bad after all. What I do is no worse and I don't even claim to be a Christian!" Temporarily, unbelieving men and women feel a sense of relief from the guilt they frequently experienced before.

Summary

It should be clear from the Scriptures that believers in a local church setting have a clear responsibility to lovingly confront and restore a fallen brother or sister in Christ. It should be clear as well that this sensitive, delicate issue must be handled with care, lest we do great damage to our witness before an unbelieving world.

STEPS TO FORGIVING OTHERS

A common problem faced by many these days involves forgiving those who have wronged us. Death and distance at times compound the problem making it difficult, even impossible, to arrange for a face-to-face meeting. The following are some suggested steps toward resolution.

- a. Understand that forgiveness is not...
 - i. Justifying, understanding, or explaining why the person acted toward you as he or she did.
 - ii. Just forgetting about the offense and trusting time to take care of it.
 - iii. Asking God to forgive the person who hurt you.
 - iv. Asking God to forgive you for being angry or resentful against the person who offended you.
 - v. Denying that you were really hurt. After all, there are others who have suffered more.
- b. Understand that it is sometimes unwise to forgive face-to-face. This tends to make

- the other person feel "put down" and make you look holier-than-thou.
- c. Select a time and place when you can be alone for an extended season.
 - d. Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to bring to your mind all the people you need to forgive and the events you need to forgive them for.
 - e. Make a list of everything the Holy Spirit brings to your mind, even if it seems trivial to you. Do not rush through this step. Allow the Holy Spirit all the time He needs to speak to you.
 - f. Take two chairs and arrange them facing each other. Seat yourself in one of the chairs.
 - g. Imagine that the first person on your list is sitting in the other chair. Disclose everything you can remember that the person has done to you. Do not hold back the tears nor the emotions that often accompany confession.
 - h. Choose by an act of your will to forgive that person once and for all time. You may not feel like forgiving. That's all right. Just do it and the feelings will follow. God will take care of that in His good time. Do not doubt what you have done is real and valid.
 - i. Release the person from the debt you feel is owed for the offense. Say, "You are free and forgiven."
 - j. If the person is still a part of your life, now is a good time to accept that individual without wanting to change aspects of his or her behavior/personality.
 - k. Thank the Lord for using each person as a tool in your life to deepen your insight into His grace and conforming you to the image of His Son.
 - l. Pray. The following is a suggested prayer as you "talk" to each person:

Because I am forgiven and accepted by Jesus Christ, I can now forgive and accept you, _____, unconditionally. I choose now to forgive you, no matter what you did to me. I release you from the hurts (take time to name the hurts) and you are no longer accountable to me for them. You are free.
 - m. When you have finished praying through the hurts you have suffered, pray the following prayer of faith:

Lord Jesus, by faith, I receive Your unconditional love and acceptance in the place of this hurt, and I trust You to meet all my needs. I take authority over the Enemy, and in the name of Jesus, I take back the ground I have allowed Satan to gain in my life because of my attitude toward _____. Right now I give this ground back to You, Lord Jesus Christ, to whom it rightfully belongs.

By Pastor John P. Burke

POSITION - MEMBERSHIP AND ACCOUNTABILITY (6/26/1999).

THE MEANING OF MEMBERSHIP AND ACCOUNTABILITY AT GRACE BRETHREN CHURCH WATERLOO, IOWA

After searching the scriptures and agreeing on concepts, the Elder Board used a statement from Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota to help with format and wording. Used with permission.

IS CHURCH MEMBERSHIP TAUGHT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?

The short answer to this question is an unqualified "yes." Membership in a local church, however, means commitment to worship the Lord corporately, to edify brothers and sisters through mutual exhortation and service, to cooperate in its mission, and to hold each other accountable to walk in a manner that is pleasing to the Lord.

The concept of mutual accountability is one of the several things that make church membership a Biblical mandate for all Christians. This becomes clearly evident when we consider the New Testament teaching on church government and church discipline as it relates to mutual accountability in a local body of believers.

CHURCH GOVERNMENT IMPLIES A MEMBERSHIP OF ACCOUNTABILITY.

The New Testament teaches that the local church is to be governed by a group of carefully chosen elders, or overseers, who are responsible to equip (Ephesians 4:11), to care for (Acts 20:28), and to teach (I Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9) its members. As well, the New Testament teaches that the members are to respect (I Thessalonians 5:12ff) and submit to elders (Hebrews 13:17). They are not, however, to treat them as infallible (I Timothy 5:20) nor elevate them in the place of Christ (Matthew 23:8-12). Elders are servants, not masters (Luke 22:28), and their leadership comes from their divine call (Acts 20:28) rather than from their desire to rule. The leadership of elders does not replace the congregation of believers as the body with final authority under the Lord (Matthew 18:17; I Corinthians 5:4; Acts 6:3; 15:22).

This whole picture of called leaders and a submissive people who affirm their leadership assumes the existence of a church membership, a church membership that evidences mutual accountability. Leadership and submission have no meaning where there is no commitment to accountability.

CHURCH DISCIPLINE IMPLIES A MEMBERSHIP OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Jesus said, "*If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan and a tax collector* (Matthew 18:15-17).

The implication here is that Christians are to become members of local churches where they are held accountable to walk in a manner that pleases the Lord. If there were no relationship of accountability it would be meaningless to "tell it to the church." In such cases, the offending person would simply say, "This church has no jurisdiction over me."

Much of the same truth is implied in I Corinthians 5. In this instance, a man in the

Corinthian church was living in blatant immorality. Even worse, he was arrogantly unrepentant. To correct this situation, Paul wrote, "Let him who has done this be removed from among you" (v. 2). He went on to say, "When you are assembled-you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (vs. 4-5).

None of this would be feasible if there were no church membership. The immoral man could simply say, "I am not accountable to you. You have no authority over me. I can do as I please." The teaching of the New Testament on church discipline, likewise, implies church membership. Simply put, a church membership that is mutually accountable is the will of God for all Christians.

THE CHURCH COVENANT

The Biblical call for a membership in a local body of believers who are mutually accountable suggests the need for believers to covenant with one another. A church covenant is simply a written summary of those Biblical values and practices that a local church agrees should be the basis for its accountability. The covenant should allow for freedom of conscience in areas where the Bible is not definite in its guidance. As well, the covenant should focus on broad principles, especially as they relate to the church's corporate life together.

What follows is the covenant of the Grace Brethren Church of Waterloo, IA.

The Covenant by which this church exists, as a distinct body, and which every member accepts, is as follows:

Acknowledging the Lord Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, and accepting the Holy Scriptures as our final rule of faith and practice, and recognizing the privilege and duty of uniting ourselves for Christian fellowship, the observance of Christian ordinances, the public worship of God, and for the advancement of the work of His Church on earth, we do now in the sight of God and invoking His blessing, solemnly covenant and agree with each other to associate ourselves together as a church of the Lord Jesus Christ, as warranted by the Word of God.

We agree to maintain the instruction of the Bible, to submit ourselves to the orderly administration of the affairs of the church, and to walk together in brotherly love. This we do depending on the aid of our Heavenly Father who so loved us that He gave His only begotten Son for our salvation; and upon Jesus Christ who hath redeemed us with His blood; and upon the Holy Spirit, our Comforter and Guide.

We understand the basic content of our preaching and teaching to be the Holy Scriptures as summarized by The Statement of Faith as held by the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches which we embrace and pledge ourselves to preach and defend.

The above covenant provides a summary of the life which we will hold each other accountable to pursue. When a person becomes a member of Grace Brethren Church, he or she pledges to live by this covenant and to help others in the church to do the same. The assumption is that "the children of light" will walk differently than "the children of darkness." But this raises the following question:

IS THE GOAL OF DISCIPLINED CHURCH MEMBERSHIP A PURE CHURCH?

Accountability in a local church does not mean that its members will ever be sinlessly perfect during this age. Sadly, all believers sin after conversion. The church is a company of forgiven sinners who continue to struggle against their own remaining

sinfulness every day.

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23)

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8)

"When I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind" (Rom. 7: 2f)

"Not that I have already obtained or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ has made me His own " (Philippians 3:12)

It is important to remember that the pursuit of obedience is not the same as perfection. Rather, the pursuit will involve failure and confession on a regular basis. The mark of a true Christian and the mark of a church member in good standing, therefore, is not sinless perfection, but a persistent fight of faith that recognizes sin as sin, confesses it, turns from it, and resolves to live a life of holiness again and again.

HOW DOES CHURCH DISCIPLINE WORK?

In any good family, discipline should always be overwhelmingly instructive and encouraging. Teaching a child how to make his bed by patient instruction is part of a well-disciplined home. As well, spankings (especially during the younger years) will probably become necessary from time to time in an atmosphere of loving, patient instruction and encouragement.

So it will be in a local church. Mutual accountability, likewise, should be overwhelmingly instructive and encouraging. As well, appropriate discipline means that ALL of us in the church are responsible both to give as well as receive encouragement, counsel, consolation, exhortation, and admonition. (Matthew 18:15-17; Gal. 6:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; Hebrews 3:13; 10:23-25).

This same truth is implied in the precious doctrine of the priesthood of believers (1 Peter 2:5,9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10). The Bible says that we are priests for each other in that we minister God's grace to each other (1 Peter 4:10), intercede for each other (Romans 15:30), and confess our sins to each other (James 5:16). Membership in the local church then is a commitment to the tender love of encouragement and to the tough love of confrontation - to give it humbly and to receive it without defensiveness.

Are there any practical guidelines given in Scripture that detail the disciplinary process? Indeed, there are. Matthew 18, verses 15-17, is a key passage on the point. It suggests the following steps:

A. Confront A Brother In Private

Step One: *Confront a sinning brother with his sin in private.* "And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private (verse 15). The verb "go" is a present imperative, meaning that this is a command, not a polite suggestion, not merely an option. If you see your brother living in sin, you *must* go. Go privately at first. There is no need to involve others at this point. Don't gossip about the offense under the guise of enlisting "prayer support." Rather, just go quietly to your brother. Tell him his fault between him and you *alone*. If this first step is successful, his answer will be sincere repentance, and that will end the process, in which case, "you have won your brother."

B. Take Some Witnesses

Unfortunately, however, this is sometimes not the end of the matter. Therefore,

Step Two is: *Take some witnesses*. "If he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed" (verse 16). Sometimes the sinning brother will refuse to listen to the rebuke. He may deny his guilt. He may deliberately continue in sin. He may try to cover up what he has done. Whatever his response, if it is not sincere repentance, you must now take one or two other believers with you and confront him again. The presence of one or two others serves several purposes. For one, it turns up the pressure. For another, the two-witness principle was clearly established in the law of Moses (Deut. 19:15) to ascertain guilt beyond reasonable doubt - and especially so in court cases. In many instances, the person confronted will respond to this second step with repentance. If so, then the matter is settled. It would seem inappropriate at this point to broaden the circle of involvement beyond those who are already witnesses.

C. Tell It To The Church

What happens if the offender still refuses to repent? Jesus' instruction is clear. Step Three is: *Tell it to the church*. "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church" (verse 17). At this point in time more people become involved. In the first step, one individual confronts the sin. If there is no satisfactory response, two or three go and the appeal is repeated. If there is still no repentance, the entire church is enlisted to appeal to the brother. Needless to say, this third step is frequently overlooked. It seems clear from Matthew 18, however, that loving discipline is never relegated to one individual. It is not the responsibility of the pastor alone. Nor is it the exclusive domain of the elders. Rather, loving discipline is clearly a corporate duty. The purity of the church is every Christian's concern. The whole church eventually needs to become involved in pursuing a sinning brother.

But suppose the offender does not repent? How long should the church wait before going to step four? Until it becomes obvious that the offender is hardening his heart. No objective time limits are given in Scripture. It seems reasonable, however, that the time should be fairly short, at most a few weeks, rather than months or years. God Himself demands a response, and a delay only indicates a hardening of the heart (Heb. 4:7).

D. Regard Him As An Unbeliever

The final step in the process is: *Regard him as an unbeliever*. "If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer" (verse 17). This final step does not call for heaping scorn on the person. Nor is it a command to treat the person badly. Rather, it simply means that the person is to be regarded as an unbeliever. The repeated hardening of the heart calls the reality of his faith into question. From henceforth, therefore, the person is to be regarded as an evangelistic prospect rather than a brother in the Lord. Implicit in this final step is the revocation of the person's membership. He is no longer to be deemed as a member of the body. Therefore, he should not be allowed to participate in the blessings and privileges of the Christian assembly. Nor should he be welcomed in the celebration of communion.

Only in rare cases does the New Testament suggest that accountability will lead to step D, an all-church disciplinary act of excommunication. It is important to remember here that not all sins are equal in every respect. True, all sins are an offense to the holiness and goodness of God. Likewise, all sins are worthy of condemnation. The fact remains,

however, that some sins reach deeper into the life of the sinner himself and are more destructive in the lives of others. Some sins bring more reproach to the name of Christ than others because they are acknowledged by a large majority to be evil and hurtful. As well, some sins are more significant because they are pursued so long and with little effort to change. Examples of sins that require public confrontation might include: serious doctrinal error, moral failure, repeated instances of the same offense, sinful habits and tendencies, sins that destroy the unity of the flock, and sins that stain the purity of the church.

It is important to remember that the primary goal in lovingly confronting a sinning brother, at whatever stage, is to win him back. II Thessalonians 3:15 says, "And yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." There is a sense in which we never let a sinning brother go, though it may become necessary to put him out of the church and out of the sphere of social fellowship. Yet we keep calling him back. If the offender at any time demonstrates genuine repentance, he is to be welcomed back. But until that point, he is to be regarded as an outsider.

Needless to say, accountability in a local church setting is tough. Church discipline is hard. It is easy to think of reasons for not taking the above steps. It's harsh. People will be offended. It's embarrassing to the person being disciplined. It will tarnish the public image of the church. What if the person being disciplined sues the church? The stark reality of the disciplinary process may drive unbelievers away. People's sins are best dealt with quietly, out of the limelight. On and on go the rationalizations. Yet in the face of all these arguments stands one overpowering reason why a church cannot afford to ignore the steps of discipline: *Jesus Christ commanded it*, and it is therefore required for all who wish to honor Him as Lord. The fact that it is easy today for a disciplined offender to simply withdraw and go to another church should not hinder the obedience of the local body.

CONCLUSION

May it be our common prayer here at Grace Brethren Church that we would be a covenant people full of love for one another, that we would reverence Christ, that we would seek to please Him in all things, that we would be "a city set on a hill" that cannot be hid, and that we would be a company of sojourners full of good works that bring glory to our Creator and Redeemer.

Responsibility: Elder Board
Chairman: Don McGriff
Date approved: June 26, 1999