

# Appendix B: Reformation Christian Fellowship Relational Commitments

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The following Relational Commitments are designed to help the members of Reformation Christian Fellowship (RCF) relate to one another in a way that honors God and promotes authentic relationships. These Commitments cover important relational issues, such as peacemaking and reconciliation, marriage and divorce, protecting children from abuse, counseling and confidentiality, and mutual accountability.

These Commitments are intended to help protect and preserve our community of faith. By community, we mean a group of people who have voluntarily joined together to encourage and support one another as we worship God, grow in our understanding of His love for us, and seek to tell others about the salvation and peace they, too, can find through faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

We know that true community is not easy to achieve and sustain. Each of us brings our own expectations and agendas into the church. This diversity usually leads to rich discussions and creative ministries, but sometimes it can lead to conflict. As James 4:1–2 (ESV) warns, “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.”

That certainly describes our warring passions! At times, no matter how hard we try to build and preserve a close community of faith, our desires and expectations still clash. That’s where these Commitments come in. They aim to pull together key principles from God’s Word and serve as our relational guidelines. These Commitments are designed to accomplish several important purposes:

- They remind us of our mutual commitment to work together to pursue unity, maintain friendships, preserve marriages, and build relationships that reflect the love of Christ.
- They help to prevent surprises, disappointed expectations, confusion, and conflict by describing how we expect to relate to one another within the church.
- They provide a clear track for us to follow when conflict threatens to divide us, and they remind us how to move quickly toward reconciliation.
- They establish guidelines for how our leaders will counsel others, guard confidential information, and protect our children from abuse.
- They define and limit the spiritual authority of church leaders and thereby pursue the fair treatment of all members.<sup>2</sup>
- Finally, they reduce our church’s exposure to legal liability by clearly describing our relational practices and by giving all who attend our church the opportunity to be informed of and give their consent to these biblical practices.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, the words “we” and “us” refer to both the members and leaders of RCF.

<sup>2</sup> When we use the term “leader” in these Commitments, we are referring to the pastors and elders of our church.

<sup>3</sup> See [www.Peacemaker.net/risk\\_management](http://www.Peacemaker.net/risk_management) for information on how these Commitments can help to prevent conflict and reduce exposure to legal liability in our church.



As you read our Relational Commitments, we encourage you to study the Bible passages that are cited next to particular provisions. We want you to be confident that these Commitments are consistent with the Word of God. If your study does not answer all of your questions and concerns, please do not hesitate to approach our leaders, who will be happy to talk with you about these principles.<sup>4</sup>

We encourage you to expressly embrace these Commitments and formally join our church by going through our membership class, acknowledging your faith in Christ, and signing the Membership Covenant. If you are not yet prepared to become a member, you and your family are welcome to attend RCF and participate in its ministries while you continue to consider the wisdom and biblical faithfulness of what membership here involves. We do take membership seriously. If you, with a clear, biblically informed conscience, cannot be a member at RCF, we hope in due time you will be a committed member at another Bible-believing church where you can thrive in the fullness of all that membership means.

Reformation Christian Fellowship Council of Elders  
Adopted on January \_\_, 2013.

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<sup>4</sup> Embracing these Relational Commitments does not imply that you affirm each and every explanatory comment, biblical interpretation, or resource mentioned in this document, but rather that you agree to support and follow the specific action steps set forth in sections entitled “Commitment to ....” If your conscience prevents you from affirming a particular concept or commitment in this document, you may request a special waiver of that provision.



## COMMITMENT TO PEACEMAKING AND RECONCILIATION

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. (Matthew 5:9 ESV)*

Our church desires to build a “culture of peace” that reflects God’s peace and the power of the gospel of Christ in our lives. As we stand in the light of the cross, we realize that bitterness, un-forgiveness, and broken relationships are not appropriate for the people whom God has reconciled to Himself through the sacrifice of His only Son (John 13:34-35; Ephesians 4:29-32; Colossians 3:12-14).

Therefore, out of love for Christ and in reliance on the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, we are committed to resolving our differences according to the following principles of peacemaking and reconciliation:

### Personal Peacemaking

- Whenever we are faced with conflict, our primary goal will be to glorify God with our thoughts, words, and actions (1 Corinthians 10:31).
- We will try to get the “logs” out of our own eyes before focusing on what others may have done wrong (Matthew 7:3-5).
- We will seek to overlook minor offenses (Proverbs 19:11).
- We will seek to refrain from all gossip, backbiting, and slander (Ephesians 4:29-32). If we have a problem with others, we will talk to them, not about them.
- We will endeavor to make charitable judgments toward one another by believing the best about each other until we have facts that prove otherwise (1 Corinthians 13:7).<sup>5</sup>
- If an offense is too serious to overlook, or if we think someone may have something against us, we will seek reconciliation without delay (Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15).
- When we offer a word of correction to others, we will do so graciously and gently, with the goal of serving and restoring them, rather than beating them down (Proverbs 12:18; Ephesians 4:29; Galatians 6:1).
- When someone tries to correct us, we will ask God to help us resist prideful defensiveness and to welcome correction with humility (Psalm 141:5; Proverbs 15:32).
- As we seek to resolve differences with others, we will look out for their concerns and interests as well as our own (Philippians 2:3-4).
- When others repent, we will ask God to give us grace to forgive them freely and fully as He has forgiven us so that we might glorify His reconciling grace (Ephesians 4:32).

In addition, if there are differences in gender, differences between a child and an adult, or differences between a single and a married person, the following guidelines apply.

- A male should include another female when confronting a female.
- A female should include another person (male or female) when confronting a male.
- A child should include a parent when confronting an adult.
- An adult should include at least one of the child’s parents when confronting a child.
- A person (single or married) should include the spouse of the married person being confronted.

### Assisted Peacemaking

- When two or more of us cannot resolve a conflict privately—whether it’s personal or has church,

<sup>5</sup> See [www.peacemaker.net/charitable\\_judgments](http://www.peacemaker.net/charitable_judgments) for more information.



business, or even legal implications—we will obey God’s command to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3 ESV) by looking to our church for assistance and cooperating with our leaders or wise people they recommend to resolve the matter through biblical mediation or arbitration (Matthew 18:16; 1 Corinthians 6:1-8).<sup>6</sup>

- If we have a conflict with a person who attends another church, we will make every effort to cooperate with our church leaders as they seek to work with the leaders of the other church to resolve the matter in a biblically faithful manner.
- If a person coming to our church has an unresolved conflict with someone in his former church, we will assist him in seeking to be reconciled to the other person before joining our church (Matthew 5:23-24; Romans 12:18).
- When a conflict involves matters of doctrine or church discipline, we will submit to the procedures set forth in our *Commitment to Accountability and Church Discipline*.
- If we have a dispute with or within our church as a corporate body and cannot resolve it internally through the steps given above, we will make every effort to resolve our differences through biblical mediation or arbitration before we resort to other processes.

Above all, we pray that our ministry of peacemaking will be a means of glorify God through knowing and make known Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See [www.peacemaker.net/slippy\\_slope](http://www.peacemaker.net/slippy_slope) for information on biblical mediation and arbitration.

<sup>7</sup> See Article II Purpose in Reformation Christian Fellowship Constitution.



## COMMITMENT TO PRESERVING MARRIAGES

*They are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate (Matthew 19:6 ESV).*

God designed marriage to reflect the beauty and permanence of Christ's loving relationship with His bride, the church (Ephesians 5:22-33; Revelation 19:7). Therefore, He established marriage to be a life-long, exclusive relationship between one man and one woman (Matthew 19:4-6). God also designed it to provide mutual companionship through life's joys and difficulties, to create stability for raising and nurturing children, and to give strength and cohesiveness to society in general.

In our society, marriages fail under a wide range of circumstances. Many people have gone through a divorce before having a relationship with Christ and have found repentance and forgiveness in coming to Christ and sought reconciliation where possible. Others have experienced divorce through no desire or decision of their own. Still others, even after professing faith in Christ, may have divorced because of their own wrongful choices, but have since repented and received the forgiveness offered through our Lord Jesus and sought reconciliation where possible. Whatever the circumstances, we welcome everyone to RCF – single, married, and divorced.

Because our church recognizes both the divine origin of marriage and the devastating effects of divorce, we are deeply committed to preserving marriages and preventing divorce. Toward this end, we will always seek to strengthen marriages and families. We require and provide serious premarital counseling to help couples enter into marriage advisedly and be well prepared for its many challenges.

As a body we encourage couples to grow together in their love for God and for one another (Hebrews 10:24-25). We expect husbands to spur each other on in loving and cherishing their wives, and wives to encourage one another in respecting and loving their husbands (Ephesians 5:33).

Our leaders are committed to helping individuals and couples receive biblical counsel and support when they face marital difficulties. We will discourage couples from using divorce as a way to run away from issues that instead can be resolved through Spirit-guided counseling, repentance, forgiveness, and ongoing discipleship.

### Diversity of Viewpoints on Divorce and Remarriage

Believers in general are not entirely of one mind on the legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage. For example, some see the Scripture forbidding remarriage after divorce as long as both spouses are living, no matter what the circumstances of the divorce were. They believe Jesus calls us in this way to the radical display of the unbreakable covenant commitment between Him and His church. Others believe that the Scripture permits divorce under the limited circumstances of unrepentant adultery or decisive abandonment by an unbelieving spouse. Some also believe Scripture allows divorce in the case of protracted life endangerment. Those that believe Scripture permits divorce in limited circumstances believe the marriage truly ends and the aggrieved spouse desiring reconciliation is free to remarry in the Lord.

### Statement of Guidelines for Mutual Accountability

In view of these differences among believers, we agree to live by the following guidelines concerning the nurturing of marriages and the exercise of redemptive church discipline wherever needed.

1. A believer and unbeliever should not marry (1 Corinthians 7:39; 2 Corinthians 6:14-15).
2. Since death breaks the marriage bond (Romans 7:2-3; 1 Corinthians 7:39), remarriage is permissible without sin for a believing widow or widower, if the marriage is with another believer.



3. Divorce may be permitted when an unbelieving spouse decisively and physically deserts the relationship (1 Corinthians 7:15) or a believing or unbelieving spouse commits repeated, unrepentant adultery (Matthew 19:9). Although not specifically mentioned in Scripture, life endangerment of the wife and/or children may lead to separation and possibly divorce. According to Ephesians 5:25-30, a husband is to love and cherish his wife, and according to Colossians 3:19, a husband is not to treat his wife harshly. In this instance all other avenues of repentance and restoration (including law enforcement if necessary) would be investigated before even considering recommending divorce. When a divorce does occur, though, we do not believe that divorce must be the last word. Even after long periods of separation and alienation, reconciliation can happen, as when the people of God return to the Lord after periods of waywardness (Hosea 2:14-23).

We want to emphasize that the phrase “divorce may be permitted” holds out the possibility that inquiry may reveal that the deserted partner engaged in a wrong behavior that drove the other away, so that a change is called for at home rather than divorce. And we want to stress that forgiveness and reconciliation between sinning spouses is preferable to separation or divorce even where adultery has occurred. This is implied in Matthew 18:21-22 (ESV), “Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.’” (See Luke 17:34).

4. The remarriage of a divorced spouse may be viewed as severing the former marriage so that the unmarried spouse whose behavior did not biblically justify being divorced may be free to remarry a believer (Matthew 19:9). Before remarriage, the unmarried spouse who committed the unbiblical divorce must confess all known sin in the divorce and make significant progress in overcoming any destructive behaviors and attitudes.

Recognizing that there are honest and devout differences of conviction over this issue, those with more limiting standards for remarriage consent at this point not to make them normative for the whole body. Others, who regard this fourth statement as fully biblical, respect those with a more limiting interpretation and do not require or expect them to act in any way against their consciences in attending, supporting, or performing enactments of marriage they regard as contrary to Scripture.

All of us urge every member who contemplates remarriage to struggle in prayer and study with all the relevant Scriptures, with the aim of glorifying God through full obedience to His Word, and consider fairly the arguments against remarriage and those for it.

Moreover, we want to affirm the goodness and beauty of a life of singleness in God’s service both before marriage and after divorce or death. It is commended in 1 Corinthians 7:7, 11, 32-35, and elevated by the examples of Jesus and Paul and hundreds of great single saints.

5. After serious efforts have been made toward reconciliation, the aggrieved partner referred to in number three may, together with the leadership of the church, come to regard the marriage as irreparably broken. In such cases remarriage may be a legitimate step, if taken with serious reckoning that this cuts off all possibility of reconciliation. (See number seven.)
6. The aggrieving partners referred to in number three (who were guilty of abandonment or adultery) should repent and be reconciled to God and to their spouses (1 Corinthians 7:11; 1 John 1:9). If it is too late because their spouses have remarried, then they should remain single because they left their first marriage without biblical warrant (Matthew 19:9; Luke 16:18, 1 Corinthians 7:10-11).



7. If a second marriage ends in death or divorce, the widow or widower in this case is not permitted to return to the first spouse in marriage (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).
8. Death of a spouse does not disqualify an elder or deacon from leadership.
9. An elder or deacon that either initiates a biblical divorce or is the unwilling participant in a divorce is not automatically disqualified from leadership. However, the elders may determine that a period of suspension would be helpful so the elder/deacon can focus on family matters. If it is determined by the elders that fulfilling the role of elder or deacon greatly contributed to the divorce, or there were serious unbiblical attitudes and/or actions by the elder or deacon before, during, or after the divorce the elder or deacon may be removed from their position (even though technically the divorce was biblical).
10. Persons remarried after an unbiblical divorce will forego positions of official leadership at RCF called elder and deacon since they remarried without biblical justification (see number six). Elders or deacons are free to remarry if the divorce was biblically justified. Again, though, in this case, the elders reserve the right to remove someone from leadership if there are attitudes and actions evidenced by the elder or deacon that would lead the elders to recommend against remarriage.

We recognize that there may be disagreements over allowing a divorced elder or deacon to remarry. Typically, 1 Timothy 3:2 and 12 are referenced when citing biblical passages that support disqualifying men from leadership that have been married more than once due to divorce. Both of these verses state an elder or deacon should be the “husband of one wife”. This is a highly disputed passage, and the RCF leadership does not believe in taking such a hard stance when the biblical support is weak. Consider the following discussion from the *ESV Study Bible*.

The meaning of **husband of one wife** (Gk. *mias gynaikos andra*) is widely debated. The Greek phrase is not common, and there are few other instances for comparison. The phrase literally states, “of one woman [wife] man [husband].” (1) Many commentators understand the phrase to mean “having the character of a one-woman man,” that is, “faithful to his wife.” In support of this view is the fact that a similar phrase is used in 1 Timothy 5:9 as a qualification for widows (Gk. *henos andros gynē*; “one-man woman,” i.e., “wife of one husband”), and in that verse it seems to refer to the trait of faithfulness, for a prohibition of remarriage after the death of a spouse would be in contradiction to Paul’s advice to young widows in 1 Timothy 5:14. Interpreters who hold this first view conclude that the wording of 1 Timothy 3:2 is too specific to be simply a requirement of marriage and not specific enough to be simply a reference to divorce or remarriage after divorce. In the context of this passage, the phrase therefore prohibits any kind of marital unfaithfulness. (2) Another view is that “husband of one wife” means polygamists cannot be elders. Interpreters who hold this view note that there is evidence of polygamy being practiced in some Jewish circles at the time. On this view, the phrase means “*at the present time* the husband of one wife,” in line with other qualifications which refer to present character. On either of these views, Paul is not prohibiting all second marriages; that is, he is not prohibiting from the eldership a man whose wife has died and who has remarried, or a man who has been divorced and who has remarried (these cases should be evaluated on an individual basis). (3) A third view is that Paul is absolutely requiring that an elder be someone who has never had more than one wife. But that does not fit the context as well, with its emphasis on present character. On any of these views, Paul is speaking of the ordinary cases and is not absolutely requiring marriage or children (cf. v. 4) but is giving a picture of the typical approved overseer as a



faithful husband and father.<sup>8</sup>

To summarize, we believe that the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 discuss the current character of the elder or deacon. The reference to “husband of one wife” was necessary due to the rampant immorality of the culture during that time. Also, focusing on the current character allows for repentance of past attitudes and actions. No one could be an elder or deacon if past sins were taken into account.

11. The amount of time that has passed and the change in standing from unbeliever to believer does not alter the application of the guidelines for divorce and remarriage. (See Matthew 19:4-6, which highlights the fact that enduring marriages are part of God’s plan for all His human creation, not just His redeemed people.)

Even though divorce is permissible under the circumstances described above, we want to emphasize that it is not required. It is not the best testimony to the covenant keeping love of Christ and His church. God patiently bears with our sins, repeatedly calls us to repentance, and freely forgives us when we turn back to Him (Psalm 103:8-12; Isaiah 55:7).

When divorce seems inevitable, an offended spouse can imitate God’s love by offering a straying spouse these same evidences of grace (Ephesians 5:1-2). This may involve patiently bearing neglect or lovingly confronting serious sin (Colossians 3:12-14; Galatians 6:1). In some situations, love may require asking the church to initiate formal discipline to rescue a spouse and a marriage from the devastating effects of unrepentant sin (Matt. 18:12-20).

Just as church leaders are involved in beginning a marriage, they should be involved when it is threatened with seeming dissolution. Therefore, when a member of RCF is considering divorce, he or she is expected to bring the situation to our elders and cooperate with them as they determine whether biblical grounds exist for the separation, as they endeavor to promote repentance and reconciliation, and, if appropriate, as they pursue redemptive discipline.

Separated spouses who are moving toward divorce, but are still legally married, should refrain from pursuing other relationships or any other activity that is inconsistent with being married.

We are always interested in helping divorced people restore their previous marriage if that is possible and appropriate. We will support a decision to pursue a second marriage to a different person only when we have determined that it is warranted according to the guidelines mentioned above, and that every reasonable effort has been made to seek and grant forgiveness of the sins that contributed to a previous divorce.

We rejoice that divorce never diminishes God’s free gift of love, grace, and forgiveness. He cherishes and loves every person who has been unwillingly divorced, as does our church. God also graciously extends His love to those who have wrongly left their marriages. That love moves Him (and us) to call them to repentance, to encourage and aid reconciliation when possible, and to gladly restore those who have done what the Scripture requires for rebuilding broken relationships.

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<sup>8</sup> The ESV Study Bible, English Standard Version (ESV), Copyright © 2008 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. All rights reserved.



## COMMITMENT TO PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN

*The prudent sees danger and hides himself (Proverbs 27:12).*

Children are a blessing from God, and He calls the church to support parents in their responsibility to train children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Therefore, the church should be a place of safety and blessing for children, where they can grow, play, form friendships, and learn to experience and share the love of Christ.

Since sin affects every person and organization in the world, it is possible that children could be harmed even during church activities. We cannot guarantee that such things will never happen at RCF, but we are committed to taking reasonable precautions to protect our children and youth from foreseeable harm. One of the ways we support this is by conducting thorough, multi-source background checks on all members entrusted with child care.

If a child or youth is harmed in our church, we will take immediate steps to inform the parents, to accept responsibility for our role in the situation, and to hold offending workers fully responsible for their actions.



## COMMITMENT TO BIBLICAL COUNSELING AND CONFIDENTIALITY

*I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another (Romans 15:14).*

Our goal in providing biblical counseling is that we may “present everyone mature in Christ” (Colossians 1:28). We believe that the Bible is God-inspired guidance, instruction, and power for faith and life (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Therefore, our counseling relies on biblical teachings and principles applied with “all wisdom” through the Holy Spirit to each situation we counsel. We are committed to asking the question, “What does Scripture say regarding this matter?” and to counseling in the light of the response to this question.

We believe that Christ has equipped His body, the church, to provide wisdom, knowledge, and instruction to one another (Romans 15:14) in order for each member to live a godly and holy life, pleasing God in all ways. Christ has also equipped His church with spiritually mature leaders who are able to shepherd, lead, teach, and counsel others (Hebrews 5:11-14) in the church. Though the educational and experiential background of each leader who counsels at RCF is unique, the essential training and practice for all leaders who counsel at RCF centers around their ability to apply Scripture to the situation they are counseling. For this reason, those who counsel for RCF do not present themselves as psychotherapists nor mental health professionals but as biblical counselors.

In order to avoid misunderstandings regarding the role of leaders in the church that provide “spiritual counsel,” the following clarifications should be kept in mind.

1. Leaders who provide spiritual counsel may also be trained in other areas of life that are outside of the realm of providing spiritual counsel. Thus, if a doctor provides “spiritual counsel” through the church, we understand that this is separate from his providing “medical counsel” at his clinic.
2. God calls the leaders in His church to set an example “in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” (1 Timothy 4:12). If any leader should not live up to this standard in any counseling situation, the counselee should report to the leadership team any conduct that fails to meet this standard.
3. Confidentiality is an important factor in establishing a relationship to receive spiritual counsel. The leader providing spiritual counsel will keep confidentiality except in the following situations:
  - a. when the person who disclosed the information, or any other person, is in imminent danger of serious harm unless others intervene (Proverbs 24:11-12);
  - b. when a person refuses to repent of sin and it becomes necessary to promote repentance through accountability and redemptive church discipline (Matthew 18:15-20);
  - c. when leaders are required by law to report suspected abuse (Romans 13:1).

Providing spiritual counsel requires a relationship between the leader and the counselee. Occasionally there may arise a misunderstanding between the counselor and the counselee. We will seek to handle these misunderstandings in a biblical way. This includes being willing to submit to legally binding arbitration, rather than filing a lawsuit, and also not attempting to require a “spiritual counselor” to appear in court or to provide his notes.

Our desire is to provide wise, spiritual, godly counsel to each person in our church. By sharing these guidelines, we hope the biblical counseling offered at RCF will help many become “mature in Christ.”



## COMMITMENT TO ACCOUNTABILITY AND CHURCH DISCIPLINE

*Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works (Heb. 10:24).*

***Like all of our Relational Commitments, the principles and practices described below apply to all Covenant Members of Reformation Christian Fellowship.***

### Accountability and Discipline Are Signs of God's Love

God has established the church to reflect His character, wisdom, and glory in the midst of a fallen world (Ephesians 3:10-11). He demonstrates His love for His church in that He sent His Son to die for her (Romans 5:8; Ephesians 5:25). His purpose for His church is to present her as a gift to His Son; thus Scripture refers to the church as the "bride" of Christ (Revelation 19:7). For this reason the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are continually working to purify the church and bring her to maturity (Ephesians 5:25-27).

This does not mean that God expects the church to be made up of perfectly pure people. He knows that the best of churches are still companies of sinners who wrestle daily with remaining sin (1 John 1:8; Philippians 3:12). Therefore, it would be unbiblical for us to expect church members to live perfectly. What we can do, however, is confess our common struggle with sin and our mutual need for God's mercy and grace. We also can spur one another on toward maturity by encouraging and holding each other accountable to love, seek after, and obey God with all of our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, and to love others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:30-31; Hebrews 10:24-25).

We sometimes refer to this process of mutual encouragement and accountability as "discipline." The Bible does not present church discipline as negative, legalistic, or harsh. True discipline originates from God Himself and is always presented as a sign of genuine love. "The Lord disciplines the one he loves" (Hebrews 12:6 ESV). "Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O LORD, and whom you teach out of your law" (Psalm 94:12 ESV). "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline" (Revelation 3:19 ESV).

God's discipline in the church, like the discipline in a good family, is intended to be primarily positive, instructive, and encouraging. This process, which is sometimes referred to as "formative discipline," involves preaching, teaching, prayer, personal Bible study, small group fellowship, and countless other enjoyable activities that challenge and encourage us to love and serve God more wholeheartedly.

On rare occasions, God's discipline, like the discipline in a family with growing children, also may have a corrective purpose. When we forget or disobey what God has taught us, He corrects us. One way He does this is to call the church to seek after us and lead us back onto the right track. This process, which is sometimes called "corrective" or "restorative" discipline, is likened in Scripture to a shepherd seeking after a lost sheep.

What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray (Matthew 18:12-13 ESV).

Thus, restorative or corrective discipline is never to be done in a harsh, vengeful, or self-righteous manner. It is always to be carried out in humility and love, with the goals of restoring someone to a close walk with Christ (Matthew 18:15; Galatians 6:1), protecting others from harm (1 Corinthians 5:6), and showing respect for the honor and glory of God's name (1 Peter 2:12).

### Most Corrective Discipline Is Private, Personal, and Informal

God gives every believer grace to be self-disciplined. "For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control" (2 Timothy 1:7 ESV; cf. Galatians 5:23). Thus, discipline always begins as a



personal matter and usually remains that way, as each of us studies God's Word, seeks Him in prayer, and draws on His grace to identify and change sinful habits and grow in godliness.

Sometimes, however, we are blind to our sins or so tangled in them that we cannot get free on our own. This is why the Bible says, "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness" (Galatians 6:1 ESV). In obedience to this command, we are committed to giving and receiving loving correction within our church whenever a sin (whether in word, behavior, or doctrine) is too serious to overlook (Proverbs 19:11).

If repeated private conversations do not lead another person to repentance, Jesus commands that we ask other brothers or sisters to get involved. "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" (Matthew 18:16 ESV). If informal conversations with these people fail to resolve the matter, then we may seek the involvement of a leader (such as a teacher or small group leader). If even these efforts fail to bring a brother or sister to repentance, and if the issue is too serious to overlook, we will move into what may be called "formal discipline."

### Formal Discipline May Involve the Entire Church

If a member persistently refuses to listen to personal and informal correction to turn from speech or behavior that the Bible defines as sin, Jesus commands us to "tell it to the church" (Matthew 18:17 ESV). This first involves informing one or more church pastors/elders about the situation. If the offense is not likely to cause imminent harm to others, our elders may approach the member privately to personally establish the facts and encourage repentance of any sin they discover. We intend to give the member every reasonable opportunity to explain and defend his or her actions. If the member recognizes his sin and repents, the matter usually ends there, unless a confession to additional people is needed.

If an offense is likely to harm others or lead them into sin, or cause division or disruption, our elders may accelerate the disciplinary process and move to protect the church (Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; Titus 3:10-11).

As the disciplinary process progresses, our elders may impose a variety of sanctions to encourage repentance, including, but not limited to, private and public admonition, withholding of the Lord's Supper, removal from office, withdrawal of normal fellowship, and, as a last resort, removal from membership (Matthew 5:23-24; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15; Matthew 18:17).

If the straying member does not repent in response to private appeals from our elders, they may inform others in the church who may be able to influence that individual or be willing to pray for him or her, or people who might be harmed or affected by that person's behavior.<sup>9</sup>

This step may include close friends, a small group, a Sunday school class, or the entire congregation if our elders deem it to be appropriate (Matthew 18:17, 1 Timothy 5:20).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For example, it is not uncommon for a person to attend a church, develop relationships of trust, persuade people to give him money to invest, and then fail to return the money as promised. When such sinful men are discovered, they may leave the church, but continue to prey on members who have not heard about their schemes. If our leaders found such a man in our church, they would call him to repent and confess his wrongs. If he refused, they would bring him under formal discipline, and also warn the congregation not to trust him with their money.

<sup>10</sup> If our leaders inform our entire congregation about a disciplinary situation, they have discretion whether to divulge the member's name. This decision usually will depend on a variety of factors, such as how widely known the situation already is, whether there might be people in the congregation who could persuade the member to repent, or whether the congregation needs to be on guard against potential harm he or she might cause (see previous footnote). Even if our leaders decide it is not necessary to identify a member specifically, they may still inform the congregation of the general situation and the disciplinary steps they have followed. This general information can help warn people who may be flirting with secret sin that they, too, may face discipline if they do not turn back to God.



If, after a reasonable period of time, the member still refuses to change, then our elders may bring the situation before the congregation, with the recommendation that the member be removed from membership and normal fellowship. This means that we will no longer treat the member as a fellow Christian. Instead of having casual, relaxed fellowship with the member, we will look for opportunities to lovingly bring the gospel to him or her, remind him or her of God's holiness and mercy, and call him or her to repent and put his or her faith in Christ (Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 5:5; 1 Timothy 1:20).

We realize that our natural human response to correction often is to hide or run away from accountability (Genesis 3:8-10). To avoid falling into this age-old trap and to strengthen our church's ability to rescue us if we are caught in sin, we agree not to run away from this church to avoid corrective discipline. Therefore, we waive our right to withdraw from membership or accountability while discipline is pending against us. Although we are free to stop attending the church at any time, we agree that a withdrawal while discipline is pending will not stop the process of discipline until the church has fulfilled its God-given responsibilities to encourage our repentance and restoration, and to bring the disciplinary process to an orderly conclusion, as described in these Commitments (Matthew 18:12-14; Galatians 6:1; Hebrews 13:17).

If a member leaves the church while discipline is in effect or is being considered, and our elders learn that he or she is attending another church, they may inform that church of the situation and ask its leaders to encourage the member to repent and be reconciled to the Lord and to any people he or she has offended. This action is intended both to help the member find freedom from his or her sin and to warn the other church about the harm that he or she might do to their members<sup>11</sup> (see Matthew 18:12-14; Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 3 John 1:9-10).

Loving restoration always stands at the heart of the disciplinary process. If a member repents, and our elders confirm his or her sincerity, we will rejoice together and gladly imitate God's forgiveness by restoring the person to fellowship within the body (Matthew 18:13; Luke 15:37, 11-32; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; Colossians 3:12-14).

People who have been disciplined by another church will not be allowed to become members at RCF until they have repented of their sins and made a reasonable effort to be reconciled, or our elders have determined that the discipline of the former church was not biblically appropriate.

As we pursue the blessings of accountability and church discipline, we intend to hold fast to the promise of Scripture: "He disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:10-11 ESV).

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<sup>11</sup> For example, if we confronted a man in our church for seducing young women, or for acting inappropriately around little children, or for sowing gossip and division, and he left and started attending another church, we would consider it our duty to urge the leaders of that church to counsel with him and to protect their people from his harmful behavior.





## WE INVITE YOU TO BECOME A MEMBER OF OUR CHURCH

We believe that God wants every Christian to become a member of a local church.<sup>12</sup> Becoming a member of a church can be a life changing decision. The preaching, teaching, fellowship, opportunities to use one's gifts, and mutual accountability that we experience in a church can dramatically change our relationship with the Lord and with the people He places in our lives. Therefore, we want potential members to take time to get to know our church, learn how we are fulfilling God's command to build His church (1 Corinthians 14:26), and see how we love and relate to one another in daily life.

If attending the membership class convinces you that joining our church will help you grow in your ability to love and serve God, we would be delighted to have you become a member of our body. By joining our church, members demonstrate in a concrete way their desire to unite with us to advance Christ's mission in the world. Membership also allows you to enjoy ministry opportunities and privileges that are not available to people who merely attend our church, including the following:

- Members may participate in congregational meetings.
- If a member needs counseling or support from our elders and their time is limited, the member's request for assistance will take precedence over requests from people who have not joined the church.
- Teaching and leadership positions are only open to members.

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<sup>12</sup> For more on the importance of church membership, see Joshua Harris, *Stop Dating the Church: Fall in Love with the Body of Christ*; the third chapter of Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church: Participating Fully in the Body of Christ*; and John's Piper sermon "How Important Is Church Membership?" available online at [www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/2008/2989\\_How\\_Important\\_Is\\_Church\\_Membership/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/2008/2989_How_Important_Is_Church_Membership/)

