



W A T E R M A R K
C O M M U N I T Y C H U R C H

Todd Wagner
Pastor, Watermark Community Church
On Care and Correction in the Church

Our Commitment to Care and Correction

At Watermark, we have spent much time sharing with others how we are going to work through our struggles, sins and differences. We want no one to be surprised, disappointed or confused when we care for each other in this way. We are specific about our relational commitments with our members and those who regularly attend so that everyone will expect that we will relate to one another in a way that honors God and promotes authentic, healthy relationships.

We are highly committed to each other, just as Jesus has commanded us to be, for the purposes of:

- *preserving relationships;*
- *maintaining and promoting peace; and, ultimately to*
- *improving and maintaining our individual and corporate ability to speak with integrity about the transforming hope available through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.*

The World's View of Hypocrisy within the Church

The world has long been frustrated with the hypocrisy and inconsistency in the church. For years, the world has criticized, and I think rightly criticized, the church for failing to live up to its own standard. It is interesting, however, to note that when a church does attempt to follow the commands of Scripture and hold one another accountable, that the world criticizes it for that and wonders why we care. We care because our Lord has modeled and described for us how we are to care for each other. Our care for one another is to be marked by compassion, humility, diligence and when necessary, progressive steps of communication and correction, as described in Matt 18:15-17.

People have speculated a lot about the context of Matthew 18. The context is that God cares greatly about His children, and as a result, He expects us to care for each other just as much. He tells us He has a special heart for those who have strayed away (v. 12-14) and that it is better for us to die 'Soprano style' (v. 6) than to be careless in the way we care for and lead each other. Finally, Matthew 18 makes it clear that in everything we do we should be ready to extend forgiveness to anyone who seeks it just as He has

lavishly given forgiveness to us. If we all lived with a passion to fulfill the instructions of Matthew 18, and the rest of Scripture for that matter, we would be infinitely better off.

Community within Watermark Community Church

Community is a part of our name. By community, we mean a group of people who have voluntarily joined together to:

- *encourage and support one another as we follow Christ;*
- *worship God;*
- *grow in our understanding of His love for us; and*
- *seek to tell others about the forgiveness and peace they too can find through faith in Jesus.*

Agreeing to Care and Correction at Watermark

It is a natural response to run from accountability and correction. That's why, through our Watermark Membership Covenant signed by all Watermark members, we agree:

- *to strengthen our ability to love each other in the midst of sin; and*
- *to not run away from this community to avoid care and correction.*

As a community, we all state (through our Membership Covenant or other relational commitments) that we waive our right to withdraw from membership or accountability if correction is pending against us. Although anyone is obviously free to stop attending Watermark at any time, we agree that a withdrawal while care and correction is ongoing will not be considered effective until the church has fulfilled its God-given responsibilities to encourage repentance and restoration and to bring the Matthew 18:15-17 process to a close.

In the course of processing life's hurts and habits, we all share information that we want to be assured is handled with the greatest of care and wisdom. Thankfully, God has given us, in His word, the blueprint for handling every aspect of complicated life issues and relationships with excellence and love. As we gather as followers of Christ, we have an absolute commitment that all participants covenant to operate under the guidance and direction of God's word in the handling of all information shared.

God has explicitly told us of the damage that gossips, slanderers and individuals who go about as "tale bearers" bring to human relationships. His word also tells us that we are to "do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit but with humility of mind are to consider others as more important than ourselves." Part of our effort to honor this command is our commitment to the following:

- *When it is necessary to share a story about a brother or sister in Christ, we must first go to that brother/sister, and explain why, in love, we are retelling a story or sharing it with others.*

- *Our commitment to confidence (literally “with faith”) is our commitment to operate with/in faith with one another that our stories, hurts and fears will be treated with all the love, grace and wisdom that God’s word commands.*

True community isn’t easy to achieve. Each of us brings our own baggage, insecurities and agendas into relationships. This sometimes leads to conflict. God is not surprised by that, in fact, He has clearly laid out in His word how we are to face these conflicts with one another.

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Bitterness, gossip, infidelity, tale-bearing, abandonment, unforgiveness and broken relationships are not acceptable practices for folks who have been restored to fellowship with God through the death of Jesus. Therefore, we lean on God’s word for guidance on how we deal with these struggles in a way that will honor God, promote justice, reconcile friendships and preserve our witness for Christ.

We commit to relate to each other this way.

- Whenever we are faced with conflict, our primary goal will be to glorify God with our thoughts, words and actions (1 Cor. 10:31).
- We will try to get the “logs” out of our own eyes before focusing on what others may have done wrong (Matt. 7:3-5).
- We will seek to overlook minor offenses (Prov. 19:11). An offense should not be overlooked when it is dishonoring to God, is damaging to relationships, is hurting other people or if the practice is hurting the offender himself.
- We will refrain from all gossip, backbiting and slander (Eph. 4:29). If we have a problem with others, we will talk *to* them, not *about* them.
- We will make “charitable judgments” toward one another by believing the best about each other until we have facts that prove otherwise (1 Cor. 13:7).
- If an offense is too serious to overlook, or if we think someone may have something against us, we will go promptly to seek reconciliation (Matt. 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” (Prov. 12:18; Eph. 4:29; Gal. 6:1).
- When someone tries to correct us, we will ask God to help us resist prideful defensiveness and to welcome correction with humility (Ps. 141:5; Prov. 15:32).
- When others repent, we will ask God to give us grace to forgive them as he has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32).
- When we discuss or negotiate substantive issues, we will look out for others’ interests as well as our own (Phil. 2:3-4).

- When two of us cannot resolve a conflict privately, we will seek the help of wise people in our church and listen humbly to their counsel (Matt. 18:16; Phil. 4:2-3). If our dispute is with a church leader, we will look to other leaders for assistance.
- When informal mediation does not resolve a dispute, we will seek formal assistance from our church leaders or people they appoint, and we will submit to their counsel and correction (Matt. 18:17-20).
- When we have a business or legal dispute with another Christian, we will make every reasonable effort to resolve the conflict within the body of Christ through biblical mediation or arbitration, rather than going to civil court (1 Cor. 6:1-8). If the other party attends another church, our leaders will offer to cooperate with the leaders of that church to resolve the matter.
- If a person coming to our church has an unresolved conflict with someone in his former church, we will require and assist him to make every reasonable effort to be reconciled to the other person before joining our church (Matt. 5:23-24; Rom. 12:18).
- When a conflict involves matters of doctrine or care and correction, we will submit to the processes set forth in Scripture and our membership commitments.

My good friend, Ken Sande, at Peacemaker Ministries has helped me immeasurably over the years in developing, deploying and communicating these truths. I quote him extensively in the following passages even as I have leaned on him heavily in my previous statements. To see more of Ken's excellent work please visit his website at www.hispeace.org or <http://www.peacemaker.net/site/c.aqKFLTOBIPH/b.958123/k.CB70/Home.htm>

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 (Eph. 3:10-11). He loves his church so much that he sent his Son to die for her (Eph. 5:25). His ultimate 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 (Rev. 19:7). For this reason the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are continually working to purify the church and bring her to maturity (Eph. 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; Phil. 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; Heb. 10:24-25).

The Bible sometimes refers to this process of mutual encouragement and accountability as "discipline." The Bible never presents church discipline as being negative, legalistic or harsh, as modern society does. True discipline originates from God himself and is always presented as a sign of genuine love. "The Lord disciplines those he loves" (Heb. 12:6). "Blessed is the man you discipline, O LORD, the man you teach from your law" (Ps. 94:12). "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline" (Rev. 3:19).

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.

If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off (Matt. 18:12-13).

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 (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1), protecting others from harm (1 Cor. 5:6), and showing respect for the honor and glory of God's name (1 Pet. 2:12).

Biblical discipline is similar to the discipline we value in other aspects of life. We admire parents who consistently teach their children how to behave properly and lovingly discipline them when they disobey. We value music teachers who bring out the best in their students by teaching them proper technique and consistently pointing out their errors so they can play a piece properly. And we applaud athletic coaches who diligently teach their players to do what is right and correct them when they fumble, so that the team works well together and can compete for the championship.

The same principles apply to the family of God. We, too, need to be taught what is right and to be lovingly corrected when we do something contrary to what God teaches us in his Word. Therefore, we as a church are committed to help one another obey God's command to be "self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined" (Titus 1:8).

The leaders of our church recognize that God has called them to an even higher level of accountability regarding their faith and conduct (James 3:1; 1 Tim. 5:19-20). Therefore, they are committed to listening humbly to loving correction from each other or from any member in our church, and, if necessary, to submitting themselves to the corrective discipline of our body.

B. Most Corrective Discipline Is Private, Personal and Informal

God gives every believer grace to be self-disciplined. "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7). 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.

But, sometimes 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 someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (Gal. 6:1). 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) seems too serious to overlook (Prov. 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 will not listen, take one or two others

along” (Matt. 18:16). *If informal conversations with these people fail to resolve the matter, then we may seek the involvement of more influential people, such as a small group leader, Sunday school teacher or church 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.”*

C. Formal Discipline May Involve the Entire Church

If an individual 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” (Matt. 18:17a). This first involves informing one or more church leaders about the situation. If the offense is not likely to cause imminent harm to others, our leaders may approach the individual privately to personally establish the facts and encourage repentance of any sin they discover. The individual will be given every reasonable opportunity to explain and defend his or her actions. If the individual 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 leaders may accelerate the entire disciplinary process and move promptly to protect the church (Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; Titus 3:10-11).

As the disciplinary process progresses, our leaders 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 (Matt. 5:23-24; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; Matt. 18:17).

If the straying individual does not repent in response to private appeals from our leaders, 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. This step may include close friends, a small group, other followers of Christ who could encourage or influence them, or the entire congregation if our leaders deem it to be appropriate (Matt. 18:17, 1 Tim. 5:20). For example, (hypothetically) if a young man is seducing several young woman in the church and refuses to allow us to hold him accountable and protect others from his behavior, we will share with the body that wisdom would not have others engage with him in relationship.

If, after a reasonable period of time, the individual still refuses to change, our leaders may formally remove him or her from membership and normal fellowship. They also may inform the church body of their decision and instruct the congregation to treat the individual as an unbeliever. This means that we will no longer treat him or her as a fellow Christian. Instead of having casual, relaxed fellowship with the individual, we will look for opportunities to lovingly bring the Gospel to him, remind him of God’s holiness and mercy, and call him to repent and put his faith in Christ (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20).