



CHURCH POLICIES

Section 4.0

Pastoral Duties/ Responsibilities

4.4 Member Relationships

4.4.2 Discipline Policies

4.4.2.1 Suspension and Disfellowship - Member

Suspension and Disfellowship - Member

Introduction

Godly unity is to be a hallmark of the Church of God (Ephesians 4:11-15). There must be appropriate loving discipline within the church to help, protect and preserve what God is building. Paul explained that it is God's will that there be peace in all the congregations. "For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints" (1 Corinthians 14:33).

Since the elders are given the responsibility to care for the flock (1 Timothy 3), there are biblically based measures an elder may employ under extreme circumstances. These procedures are Suspension and Disfellowshipping (1 Corinthians 5:11-13, Romans 16:17). While the words "suspension" and "disfellowshipping" are not found in Scripture, their meanings are embedded in God's Word.

The methods that may be used as a last resort to handle situations such as division or sin that affect the congregation are suspension and disfellowshipping.

This policy is established to clarify the meaning and application of these disciplinary measures.

Defining the Terms

Suspension is the act of instructing someone not to attend church services and other church functions **on a temporary basis**. This is primarily done for the benefit of the one suspended, but there may be occasions in which it is done to protect the congregation. It may also serve as an example to the congregation when a significant number of members are aware of the serious nature of the infraction.

Disfellowshipping is the church-initiated exclusion of a person from the membership roles of the church and from attending church services and all church activities until such time as fruits of repentance are demonstrated.

Reasons

1. Causing division (Romans 16:17-18; Titus 3:10).
2. Habitual sin (1 Corinthians 5:11).

Purposes

The reasons for suspension and disfellowshipping should be love and concern for the individual involved and also for the care and protection of the affected congregation(s) and Church. They are tools for teaching and protection, not for retaliation. **As tools of last resort, they should only be used after the ministry has exhausted efforts to instruct, reason and warn.** In addition to the more immediate function of protecting the congregation, the proper use of suspension or disfellowshipping is God's way of helping some individuals come to understand that unless they repent and allow themselves to be led by God's Holy Spirit, their very salvation could be at stake (1 Corinthians 5:5).

The purpose of suspension is used as an initial attempt to cope with an extreme behavior of a member of the church. It is usually for a specified period and is utilized to aid the member involved in re-evaluating his/her spiritual condition. An additional purpose would be to protect the membership from an individual's behavior. The hopeful outcome of suspension is the restoration of the individual to a sound spiritual state and to the fellowship of the church.

Disfellowshipping an individual is the most extreme step taken in handling a member's unacceptable behavior. Disfellowshipping has two primary purposes: 1) to enable the affected member to work through his/her spiritual difficulty while being denied fellowship with the Church. 2) To protect the Church as a whole from being affected by the individual's situation. The hopeful outcome of the use of this measure is that the disfellowshipped individual will ultimately be restored to a sound spiritual state and to the fellowship of the Church (2 Corinthians 2:1-8). Disfellowshipping usually involves an indefinite period of time.

Application

Paul instructed the Corinthian congregation to remove a member from their fellowship (disfellowship) because of the seriousness of the member's sin and the potential for this type of sin to spread throughout the congregation (1 Corinthians 5:1-13). In this chapter Paul includes the two primary reasons for disfellowshipping a person:

1. Love and concern for the person involved, hoping he will repent of his sin (verse 5).
2. For the protection of the rest of the congregation (verse 6).

Paul showed by his example that the ministry of Jesus Christ needed to properly handle situations that threatened the spiritual well being of a member and the peace and stability of the Church.

Proper use of disfellowshipping can prompt an individual to repent of sin, can prevent sin from affecting others, and can preserve unity. This is a God-given responsibility of the ministry. The authority God has given to His ministry is to be used to serve others. It must be used appropriately and in such a way as to express God's love for His children. Using this as a basis for understanding, it is clear that suspending or disfellowshipping someone from services should not be taken lightly. It should not be done out of personal frustration. It should not be done as an easy way to "rid ourselves of a problem."

Suspension and disfellowshipping should be used only after efforts to teach and help the member.

It should be used as a tool to help the individual recover himself/herself from his/her unacceptable ways. The exercising of such authority by the ministry must be done very gently and after showing much patience and care (2 Timothy 2:24-26). It is strongly recommended that before such action is taken that the ministry involved should pray fervently to God and be certain they have all the facts in the situation. He should consult with his Regional Pastor or international equivalent prior to enforcing such strong measures. It should be noted that there may be very rare circumstances where quick action might be necessary and where the process listed below may not be followed (Jude 22-23).

Appropriate Steps in the Process of Suspension or Disfellowshipping

1. If a church member causes serious division or if a member is habitually sinning to the point that it is seriously affecting the peace and unity of the congregation and/or the spiritual well being of a member, **the pastor needs to clearly and plainly explain the seriousness of the situation to the**



CHURCH POLICIES

Section 4.0

Pastoral Duties/ Responsibilities

4.4 Member Relationships

4.4.2 Discipline Policies

4.4.2.1 Suspension and Disfellowship - Member

person(s) involved. The purpose of this meeting is to encourage repentance of such attitudes or actions that are violating Scripture and threatening the peace and unity of the congregation. It would also serve as a warning to the person(s) involved (2 Thessalonians 3:15). It is our hope that such a warning given in love would cause the person to see his/her error and to repent. (The pastor should document this visit and warning to the affected party.)

2. After a reasonable amount of time has passed from the first warning and if there were insufficient change in the attitude or action of the person(s), it would be wise to give a second warning to the individual(s) involved. This principle may be drawn from Titus 3:9-11. Though Paul is specifically talking about heresy, the principle is a good one to follow generally. This second warning may serve the purpose of emphasizing the seriousness of the situation, as well as demonstrating the pastor's desire to patiently work with the individual(s) involved, instead of just excluding the person(s) from the congregation. (Once again documentation ought to be made of the visit and the second warning.)
3. If there is insufficient change after the second reasonable warning, the individual(s) should be suspended from the church, until genuine repentance is evidenced. Suspension of a person should only occur after the pastor can demonstrate a record of instructions and warnings on the issues of concern. The pastor should seek the input and counsel of the elders in the area or a neighboring pastor before taking such action. On the other hand, it is not recommended that the membership be publicly notified of any suspensions, unless it becomes absolutely necessary. The intent of a private suspension is to encourage the individual to repent and then to return to the church. Notifying the membership of the suspension can make it harder for the person to feel comfortable returning to church. Once a person is suspended, the minister should not desert that person. It is the responsibility of the minister to follow up with further counsel and encouragement as needed and appropriate. Sermon tapes should be offered to those who are suspended.
4. Though suspension is normally recommended to precede disfellowshipping, there can be situations where this is not necessary. If a situation is very serious and the pastor assesses that disfellowshipping is warranted without first suspending the person, it can be done. However, the pastor should discuss the situation with his regional pastor and/or with Ministerial Services to see if others agree with his assessment. Disfellowshipping should generally be used after a suspension where there has been no satisfactory response or repentance. It is important to notify any individuals who are being disfellowshipped. It is preferable that this be done in person in as gentle as and kind manner as possible. If notification in person is not possible, then notice can be done over the phone or in a letter. If a letter is used, care should be taken to mention only that disfellowshipping was necessary "for cause", without writing the details. The individual(s) disfellowshipped should be told that they could contact the ministry for counseling, direction, and encouragement. It should also be noted that the church is desirous of their repentance and return.

5. On a rare occasion it may be necessary for the church to actually announce to the congregations that a person has been disfellowshipped and removed from the church, as was the case in 1 Corinthians 5. Paul gave some brief instructions on this subject in Romans 16:17-18 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15. This announcement would be made to protect the church from confusion and division from a person who would try to disrupt the church. These cases would be the rare exception, and would need to be handled with care and discretion to not disclose more than is absolutely necessary. Pastors should review what they plan to announce with their Regional Pastor (or international equivalent) prior to making such public. Since our hope is repentance of the disfellowshipped person, it is clear that the announcing of a person being disfellowshipped should only be done in extreme cases that threaten the unity and peace of the church.

In such cases a generic announcement such as the following should be read in the churches: "In accordance with the biblical commands, the doctrine and long standing practices of the church, we are sometimes required to announce that certain people have been (*suspended or disfellowshipped*). It is our unpleasant duty at this time to notify you that (*Mr. and/or Mrs. or Ms.*)_____ has/have been (*suspended or disfellowshipped*). The church does not, and you should not, bear any ill will toward (*Mr./Mrs./Ms.*)_____. Rather, you should pray that God will grant (*him/her*) repentance."

Conclusion

One of the most encouraging accounts dealing with disfellowshipping in the Scriptures is the account in 2 Corinthians 2:3-11. Here Paul reports that the person he instructed the congregation to disfellowship in his previous letter (1 Corinthians 5), had later repented and was now to be restored to the fellowship of the church. This demonstrates benefit that can come from properly using disfellowshipping as a tool.

Approved 8/30/99 – Council of Elders