

BETHLEHEM RELATIONAL COMMITMENTS

JULY 22, 2008

Introduction

The following Commitments and Church Covenant are designed to help the people who are members of our church 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 us build a strong 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.

We know that true community isn't easy to achieve. 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 warns, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it."

That certainly describes us! At times, no matter how hard we try to build a close community of faith, our desires and expectations still clash. That's where these Commitments come in. They pull together key principles from God's Word and serve as our relational guidelines. These Commitments 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 run on 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 insure that all members are treated fairly.¹
- Finally, they reduce our church's exposure to legal liability by clearly establishing our relational practices and by affirming our mutual commitment to resolve conflict biblically.²

¹ When we use the term "leader" in these Commitments, we are referring to the pastors and elders of our church.

² See www.PeacemakerChurch.net 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 based solidly on 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.

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 Church Covenant. If you are not yet prepared to become a member, you and your family are welcome to attend Bethlehem 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 Bethlehem, 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.

Bethlehem Baptist Church Council of Elders
Adopted on July 22, 2008

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A TALE OF TWO FAMILIES

Two boys, John and Luke, lost their mother at a young age. When they were in their teens, their father was reported to have died when his plane crashed into the ocean. The boys had no other relatives, so two neighboring families took them in.

The Friendly family did all they could to make John feel welcome in their home. They gave him his own bedroom, provided his meals, and encouraged him to join in family activities. Not wanting him to feel any pressure, they did not explain to him any of the family rules. Instead they hoped that he would notice how their other children behaved and decide on his own to act the same way.

Not knowing exactly what was expected of him, John frequently disappointed the family by violating unspoken rules. Feeling judged and unconnected to the family, he became increasingly independent. He came and went at any hour, played loud music, and spent long hours in his room with a variety of girls. When Mr. Friendly finally tried to talk with him about his behavior, John said, "I'm not your son, so you have no right to tell me how to live my life. I like having a bedroom and meals whenever I decide to be here, but I'll still do whatever seems right to me."

Tensions continued to build, and finally Mr. Friendly asked John to leave. Fortunately for John, there was another Friendly family in town, and they were happy to take him in. But there the cycle started all over again.

John's brother had an entirely different experience. Luke was taken in by the Loving family. They wanted him to feel welcome, so they gave him a room, provided meals, and encouraged him to join in family activities. But they also wanted to avoid misunderstandings and conflict. So shortly after Luke arrived, Mr. Loving explained the family rules to Luke, so he would know how to get along with the rest of the family. He said, "Even though you are not my son, I will be glad to look out for you the best I can. But as long as you are in my home, I also will expect you to behave as my other children do."

Like any normal teenager, Luke sometimes broke the rules. When he did, Mr. Loving sat down with him, pointed out what he'd done wrong, and held him accountable to the same standards he had established for his other children. Luke sometimes resented this discipline, but he eventually realized it was always done in love, and it kept him out of a lot of trouble.

After a few months, Mr. Loving approached Luke and said, "Since you are living here like part of the family, we would like to make it official. If you feel this is where you'd like to stay, we'd like to adopt you and make you our son."

Luke gladly accepted and formally committed himself to the family. In doing so, he changed from being an orphan who merely resided in the home to being a son who willingly accepted and enjoyed all of the same responsibilities and privileges of his new brothers and sisters.

Suppose that John and Luke's father is rescued from an island two years later. When he is reunited with his sons and hears what has happened to them, which family will he thank the most? The Friendly family, who were kind enough to give John a place to hang out, but could

not bring themselves to give him any boundaries? Or the Loving family, who welcomed Luke in, held him accountable to the same rules as the rest of the family, and invited him to be a son?

The answer is obvious. And there is a real Father who one day will evaluate the way we care for the people who come into our church family. Therefore, we are glad to welcome people and give them a place to worship, grow and serve. But being “friendly” is not good enough. We want to be loving, as God defines loving (Heb. 12:5-6; 10:24). Therefore, we will encourage and expect everyone who attends our church to live out the biblical principles that are summarized in these Relational Commitments.

And when people have lived like part of our family for a while, we will encourage them to “make it official.” Living like an orphan, with its illusion of independence and self-determination, may seem appealing to some. But it cannot compare to the security, privileges, and sense of belonging that come from joining a biblical church and living as truly committed brothers and sisters in the family of God

COMMITMENT TO PEACEMAKING AND RECONCILIATION

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God (Matt. 5:9).

Our church is committed to building 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, unforgiveness 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; Eph. 4:29-32; Col. 3:12-14).

Therefore, we look to the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit for guidance on how we can respond to conflict in a way that will honor God, promote justice, reconcile relationships, and preserve our witness for Christ. As God gives us His wisdom and grace, we are committed to actively teaching and encouraging one another to trust God and seek His help in living out 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 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).
- We will refrain from all gossip, backbiting and slander (Eph. 4:29-32). 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 seek reconciliation without delay (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).

Assisted Peacemaking

- When two of us cannot resolve a conflict privately, we will seek the mediation 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 church discipline, we will submit to the procedures set forth in our *Commitment to Accountability and Church Discipline*.
- If we have a legal dispute with or within our church and cannot resolve it internally through the steps given above, we will obey God's command not to go into the civil court (1 Cor. 6:1-8). Instead, we will submit the matter to mediation and, if necessary, legally binding arbitration, in accordance with the *Rules of Procedure for Christian Conciliation* of the Institute for Christian Conciliation, a division of Peacemaker Ministries (www.Peacemaker.net).

Above all, we pray that our ministry of peacemaking will be a means of spreading a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy (and peace) of all peoples through Jesus Christ.³

³ Mission statement, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN 55415

COMMITMENT TO PRESERVING MARRIAGES

*So they are no longer two but one. Therefore, what God has joined together,
let man not separate (Matt. 19:6).*

God designed marriage to reflect the beauty and permanence of Christ's loving relationship with His bride, the church (Eph. 5:22-33; Rev. 19:7). Therefore, he established marriage to be a life-long, exclusive relationship between one man and one woman (Matt. 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. We want all of you to know that you are welcome in our church.

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 devote a significant portion of our preaching and teaching ministry to strengthening 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.

We also encourage couples to nurture their marriages by participating in our small-group ministry where they can grow together in their love for God and for one another (Heb. 10:24-25). As relationships deepen within these groups, 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 (Eph. 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 at Bethlehem

The leaders of Bethlehem are not entirely of one mind on the legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage. For example, some of us see the scripture forbidding remarriage after divorce as long as both spouses are living, no matter what the circumstances of the divorce were. We believe Jesus calls us in this way to the radical display of the unbreakable covenant commitment between him and his church.

Others of us, believe that the scripture permits divorce under the limited circumstances of unrepentant adultery or decisive abandonment or protracted life-endangerment. In these cases we believe the marriage truly ends and the reconciliation-desiring, aggrieved spouse is free to remarry in the Lord.

Statement of Guidelines for Mutual Accountability

In view of these differences among us, 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 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14-15).
2. Since death breaks the marriage bond (Rom. 7:2-3; 1 Cor. 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 a spouse decisively and physically deserts the relationship, commits repeated, unrepentant adultery, or is guilty of protracted, unrepentant life-endangerment (1 Cor. 7:15; Mat. 19:9; 1 Cor. 7:11). 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, "Then Peter came and said to Jesus, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven'" (see Luke 17:3-4.)

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), if he or she has confessed all known sin in the divorce, and has made significant progress in overcoming any destructive behaviors and attitudes.

Recognizing the honest and devout differences of conviction in the church, those of us with more limiting standards for remarriage consent at this point not to make them normative for the whole body. Others of us, who regard this fourth statement as fully Biblical, respect those among us 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 sole aim of glorifying God through full obedience to his word. 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 guideline #3 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 a reconciliation that God may yet be willing to produce. (See Guideline #7)

6. The aggrieving partners referred to in #3 (who were guilty of abandonment, adultery or life-endangerment) 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 7:11).

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. Persons remarried after divorce will forego positions of official leadership at Bethlehem which correspond to the role of elders or deacons (1 Tim. 3:2, 12).

9. 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 stress 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 (Ps. 103:8-12; Isa. 55:7).

When divorce seems inevitable, an offended spouse can imitate God's love by offering a straying spouse these same evidences of grace (Eph. 5:1-2). This may involve patiently bearing neglect or lovingly confronting serious sin (Col. 3:12-14; Gal. 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 Bethlehem 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, and as they endeavor to promote repentance and reconciliation, and pursue redemptive discipline, if appropriate.

Separated spouses who are moving toward divorce, but are still legally married, should refrain from dating 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 offer 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 to rebuild broken relationships.

COMMITMENT TO PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN

The prudent see danger and take refuge (Prov. 27:12a).

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 Bethlehem, but we are committed to taking every reasonable precaution to protect our children and youth from foreseeable harm.

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. We will also regularly review our policies, practices and procedures, to consider changes that might reduce the likelihood of such harm to children in the future.

COMMITMENT TO BIBLICAL COUNSELING AND CONFIDENTIALITY

I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another (Rom. 15:14).

Our goal in providing Biblical Counseling is that we may “present everyone mature in Christ” (Col.1:28). We believe that the Bible is God-inspired guidance, instruction and power for faith and life (2 Tim. 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 (Rom.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 (Heb.5:11-14) in the church. Though the educational and experiential background of each leader who counsels at Bethlehem is unique, the essential training and practice for all leaders who counsel at Bethlehem centers around their ability to apply Scripture to the situation they are counseling. For this reason, those who counsel for Bethlehem 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” these 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, you need to 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 life, in love, and in faith and purity” (1 Tim. 4:12). If any leader should not live up to this standard in any counseling situation, the counselee needs to 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:
 - when the person who disclosed the information, or any other person, is in imminent danger of serious harm unless others intervene (Prov. 24:11-12);
 - when a person refuses to repent of sin and it becomes necessary to promote repentance through accountability and redemptive church discipline (Matt. 18:15-20);
 - when leaders are required by law to report suspected abuse (Rom. 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 require our members 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 Bethlehem will help many become “mature in Christ”.

COMMITMENT TO ACCOUNTABILITY AND CHURCH DISCIPLINE

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24).

Like all of our Relational Commitments, the principles and practices described below apply to all Covenant Members of Bethlehem Baptist Church.

A. 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).

We sometimes refer 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.

Similarly, in the church, we 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 elders and 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; cf. Gal. 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.

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, church leader, or elder. 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 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"

(Matt. 18:17a). This first involves informing one or more church 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. The member will be given 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 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 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 (Matt. 5:23-24; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; Matt. 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.⁴ 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 (Matt. 18:17, 1 Tim. 5:20).⁵

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. If the congregation supports that recommendation, we will treat the member as an unbeliever.* 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 (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20).

We realize that our natural human response to correction often is to hide or run away from accountability (Gen. 3:8-10). To avoid falling into this age-old trap and to strengthen our

⁴ 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. Senior citizens are particularly vulnerable to these schemes, and many people have lost much of what they had saved for retirement. When such sinful men are discovered, they usually leave a 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.

⁵ 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 to enlist wide prayer support, let the congregation know that our leaders are obeying the Lord's command to seek after those who stray, and warn people who may be flirting with secret sin that they, too, may face discipline if they do not turn back to God.

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 (Matt. 18:12-14; Gal. 6:1; Heb. 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 members⁶ (see Matt. 18:12-14; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 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 (see Matt. 18:13; Luke 15:3-7, 11-32; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; Col. 3:12-14).

People who have been disciplined by another church will not be allowed to become members at Bethlehem 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 will hold fast to the promise of Scripture: "God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:10-11).

⁶ 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. To learn why, please read Joshua Harris's book, *Stop Dating the Church: Fall in Love with the Body of Christ*, and the third chapter of Donald Whitney's book, *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church: Participating Fully in the Body of Christ*. Both books are available in our church library.

Becoming a member of a church can be a life-changing decision. The preaching, teaching, fellowship, opportunities to use your gifts, and mutual accountability that you experience in a church can dramatically change your relationship with the Lord and with the people he places in your life. Therefore, we want you to take time to get to know our church, learn how we are fulfilling God's command to build His church (1 Cor. 14:26), and see how we love and relate to one another in daily life.

We invite you to attend our membership class. During that class you can learn more about our church's doctrines and vision for ministry, and about the privileges and responsibilities of formal membership. Attending the class will *not* obligate you to become a member.

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, you will demonstrate in a concrete way your desire to unite with us to advance Christ's mission in the world. Membership also will allow you to enjoy ministry opportunities and privileges that are not available to people who only attend our church, including the following:

- You may *participate and vote in congregational meetings*, where we seek to discern and plan how to follow God's vision for our church.
- If you need counseling or support from our elders when their time is limited, *your request for assistance will take precedence* over requests from people who have not joined the church.
- There are some teaching and leadership ministries that are only open to members.

If you would like to learn more about the importance⁷ of church membership, please read the books mentioned above. You may also meet with our elders, who would be happy to discuss any questions or concerns you may have about membership.

⁷ One may also read John Piper's sermon "How Important Is Church Membership?" from 7-12-08 found at http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/2008/2989_How_Important_Is_Church_Membership/