

15 – Church Discipline

Mayflower's formative and corrective discipline framework. Defines authority, biblical pattern, process, restoration pathway, and documentation. Aligned with Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 5, and Galatians 6.

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Overview: Church Discipline

Status

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This book holds Mayflower Church's framework for formative and corrective discipline. It exists to protect the flock, restore the wandering, and shepherd accountability with clarity and compassion — never to punish, shame, or exclude.

The framework defines who has authority to discipline, the biblical pattern (Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 5, Galatians 6), the step-by-step process, restoration pathways, and how discipline is documented and communicated. Pastors, elders, deacons, and ministry leaders should read this before any discipline conversation begins.

Church Discipline Framework

— May 2026

Mayflower Church Discipline Framework

Walking Together Under Christ — A Pastoral and Procedural Guide for the Elders and the Congregation

Drafted May 2026 | Aligned to Mayflower Constitution and Bylaws (Article I, Section A, ¶4 “Biblical Conflict Resolution and Restoration” and ¶5 “Termination of Membership”)

1. Purpose and Scope

This framework guides the Elders of Mayflower Church and the gathered congregation in the practice of church discipline. Its aim is not control but care — the obedient and tender pursuit of Christ’s command in Matthew 18:15–20 toward the glory of God, the purity of his church, the restoration of straying members, and the protection of the flock.[\[1\]](#)

This framework operates in view of, and in submission to, the Mayflower Constitution and Bylaws — particularly Article I, Section A, Paragraph 4 (“Biblical Conflict Resolution and Restoration”) and Paragraph 5 (“Termination of Membership”). It does not amend the bylaws. It defines how the Elders will carry out the duties the bylaws place upon them, and how the church will follow Matthew 18 together. Where this framework conflicts with the bylaws, the bylaws govern.

This framework applies to all members of Mayflower Church. Its principles also bear on regular attenders insofar as they have come under the spiritual care of the Elders; but the procedural steps that culminate in church action presuppose membership.

2. Biblical Foundations

Church discipline is not a human invention. The risen Christ commands his church to address sin in its own body (Matt. 18:15–20), gives the keys of the kingdom for that purpose (Matt. 16:19; 18:18–19), and places the practice within the ongoing care of pastor-elders (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1–4; Heb. 13:17). The apostles model the practice (1 Cor. 5:1–13; 2 Cor. 2:5–11; Gal. 6:1–2; 2 Thess. 3:6–15; 1 Tim. 5:19–20; Titus 3:10–11), and the Old Testament prefigures it in the covenant

assembly (Lev. 19:17; Deut. 19:15).

The framework rests on five anchor texts that shape every section that follows:

- **Matt. 18:15-20** — the pattern (private → witnesses → church → as a Gentile and tax collector), grounded in Christ's authority.
- **1 Cor. 5:1-13** — the church's responsibility to address public, unrepentant sin within the body.
- **Gal. 6:1-2** — the aim and tone: restoration in a spirit of gentleness, with self-examination.
- **2 Cor. 2:5-11** — the end of every right discipline is forgiveness, comfort, and reaffirmation of love.
- **1 Tim. 5:19-20** — the special standard for charges against an elder.

3. Three Convictions That Govern Our Practice

Three convictions, drawn from those texts, govern how Mayflower exercises discipline.

1. **It is a means of grace, not a weapon.** Discipline is the church's loving labor for the soul of a sinning brother or sister. We discipline because we love (Heb. 12:5-11; Rev. 3:19), and because Christ has given us a stewardship of one another's holiness.
2. **It is the work of the body, led by the Elders, under Christ.** The Elders shepherd the process and bear primary responsibility (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). The congregation is not a spectator: at the third step, the matter comes to the gathered church, because Christ has given the keys to his assembled people (Matt. 18:17-20; 1 Cor. 5:4-5).
3. **It is patient, gentle, and prayerful.** Every step is bathed in self-examination, fasting, and prayer (Matt. 7:3-5; Gal. 6:1; Eph. 6:18). Speed is not faithfulness; faithfulness is faithfulness. We move at the pace of love, neither rushing toward removal nor delaying obedience.

4. The Two Categories of Discipline

Discipline, biblically understood, is broader than the four steps. Mayflower distinguishes two categories, both essential to the health of the body.[\[2\]](#)

Formative discipline is the ordinary, daily shaping of believers through Word and ordinance: preaching, teaching, the Lord’s Supper, baptism, biblical counseling, member care, accountability, prayer, mutual exhortation, and correction in love (Eph. 4:11–16; Col. 3:16). Most of what is needed in any given year is formative. The framework that follows does not displace formative discipline — it presupposes it.

Corrective discipline is the focused response to a member who is drifting into, or persisting in, unrepentant sin. The four steps of Matthew 18 govern this category. When the Elders speak of “discipline” in the formal sense, they mean corrective discipline.

5. Discerning the Matter — Sin to Overlook vs. Sin to Address

Not every offense calls for confrontation. Scripture instructs the church to bear with one another in love (Eph. 4:2), to overlook offenses where possible (Prov. 19:11; 1 Pet. 4:8), and to give grace as we have received grace (Col. 3:13). At the same time, Scripture forbids the silent toleration of serious sin (Lev. 19:17; 1 Cor. 5:6).

A matter normally rises to the level of corrective discipline when one or more of the following are present:[\[3\]](#)

1. The sin is **dishonoring to God’s name** in a way the offender refuses to address.
2. The sin is **damaging to the offender** — placing soul or body in jeopardy.
3. The sin is **damaging to others** — to victims, family, the body, or witness.
4. The sin involves a **breach of the church’s covenant or membership commitments**.
5. The sin is **being persisted in despite previous appeal**.

Where the matter does not rise to that level, the bylaws’ counsel applies: prayerful self-examination, overlooking, and renewed love (Bylaws I.A.4.b.2(a)).

6. The Four Steps of Matthew 18 —

Operationalized

The four steps that follow flesh out, and do not replace, the Biblical Conflict Resolution and Restoration provisions of the bylaws.^[4] They describe how Mayflower walks through Matthew 18 with care.

6.1 Step One — Private, Personal, and Patient (Matt. 18:15)

Who acts. The brother or sister directly involved — the offended party, or a member who has personal knowledge of the sin. Not the Elders, not a third party, not the congregation — though counsel from any of these is appropriate.

Posture. Self-examination first (Matt. 7:3-5). The aim is not to win an argument but to win the brother (Matt. 18:15c). Confess your own contribution before naming his (Bylaws I.A.4.a.2).

Action. Go privately. Speak directly. Repeat as needed. Where conversation is unsafe (e.g., risk of physical harm), Step One is satisfied by a written communication or by proceeding directly to Step Two with elder involvement.

When Step One is complete. Either the brother repents — and the matter ends with thanksgiving — or he refuses to hear, and the matter proceeds.

Pastoral care available at this step. Members are encouraged to seek the counsel of an Elder before, during, or after Step One. This does not constitute the Elders' formal involvement in the case; it is part of ordinary pastoral care, and confidentiality is maintained accordingly.

6.2 Step Two — One or Two Witnesses (Matt. 18:16)

Who acts. The original brother or sister, joined by one or two others who can confirm the facts and weigh the matter (Deut. 19:15). These are normally Elders or other mature members, but may include Christian friends from another congregation or a trained Christian conciliator (Bylaws

I.A.4.b.2(c)).

Purpose. Twofold: to establish “every charge” (Deut. 19:15; 2 Cor. 13:1), and to add weight, perspective, and prayer.

Notification of Elders. When Step Two is reached, the Elders are informed of the matter — even if they are not among the witnesses — so that they may bear it in prayer and stand ready. This notification is confidential.

When Step Two is complete. Either the brother repents (matter ends; the Elders are notified that the matter has been resolved), or he again refuses, and the matter proceeds to the Elders for evaluation.

6.3 Step Three — Tell It to the Church (Matt. 18:17a)

Elder evaluation precedes the church. Before any matter is brought before the gathered church, the Board of Elders deliberates. The Elders confirm:

- That Steps One and Two have been carried out faithfully (or that the nature of the sin properly bypasses Step One — see §7 and §8.1).
- That the facts are established by sufficient witness.
- That the sin is one which, if persisted in, threatens the offender, the offender’s relationships, the body, or the church’s witness.
- That repentance has not occurred despite faithful appeal.

Elder decisions on whether to proceed are unanimous (Bylaws II.B.1.c.7).

Pastoral appeal by the Elders. Before bringing the matter to the church, the Elders themselves make a final appeal to the member — in writing and in person where possible — urging repentance and explaining the next step. A reasonable period (ordinarily not less than two weeks, not more than ninety days) is given for response.

Bringing the matter to the church. If repentance does not follow, the Elders bring the matter to a duly called business meeting of the church, called by the Clerk on the request of the Elders under Bylaws III.B.7. The call to the meeting names the matter only as the bylaws require for legal notice; sensitive details are reserved for the meeting itself.

At the meeting, the Elders:

1. Briefly state the nature of the sin and the steps already taken, with appropriate restraint about details.

2. Confirm to the church that the member has been informed of this meeting and afforded full opportunity to be present.
3. Lead the church in prayer for the member.
4. Ask the church to join the Elders in a final, corporate appeal — calling the member to repentance.

The corporate appeal may be communicated to the member by letter from the Elders, signed on behalf of the church. A further period of time (ordinarily four to eight weeks) is given for response.

The member's right to be heard. At any point in the process, the member is entitled to address the Elders directly, to provide additional information, and (at Step Three) to be heard by the church. The member may bring a fellow believer for support. The bylaws' arbitration provision (I.A.4.b.4) remains available where the matter has become a dispute over fact or interpretation rather than a refusal to repent of acknowledged sin.

6.4 Step Four — As a Gentile and Tax Collector (Matt. 18:17b)

If the member persists in unrepentance after the church's corporate appeal, the Elders bring before the congregation a motion to remove the member from membership, under Bylaws I.A.5.f.3 ("Formal/Corrective Church discipline"). The bylaw threshold applies: a two-thirds vote of the members present and voting.

The action is grave. It says, with grief and prayer, that the church can no longer affirm a credible profession of faith in this member, and that the member's pattern of life is no longer one we recognize as belonging to Christ's flock (Matt. 18:17b; 1 Cor. 5:11-13). The aim is still restoration: that, no longer comforted by an unwarranted assurance, the member would be brought to repentance and faith (1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Thess. 3:14-15).

After removal:

1. The Elders communicate the action to the member in writing, with continued tenderness and an open door to repentance.
2. The church is informed of the action. Members are exhorted (per 1 Cor. 5:11; 2 Thess. 3:14-15) not to keep close company with the removed person in a way that signals normalcy, while continuing to greet, pray, and bear gospel witness.
3. The Elders maintain a posture of welcome. If the removed person attends a public service, they are welcomed as any unbeliever is welcomed: graciously, with the gospel.

4. The action is communicated to a sister church receiving the person, only with the person's consent or in conformity with the bylaws' arbitration provisions.

7. Discipline Initiated by the Elders

Matthew 18 envisions a sin "between you and him." But Scripture also envisions the Elders acting on sin that has come to their attention through other means: their own observation, the report of a third party, a credible disclosure to a counselor, or public knowledge (1 Cor. 5; Acts 20:28; Titus 1:13). The bylaws' Biblical Conflict Resolution provisions assume member-to-member conflict; this section addresses sin not brought as a conflict.

Pattern. In such cases, the Elders ordinarily take the role of the brother in Step One — going privately to the member, in pairs, with self-examination and prayer. They confirm the facts. They appeal for repentance. They proceed, if needed, through the equivalents of Steps Two, Three, and Four.

What does not change. The aim remains restoration. The standards of evidence, the opportunity for the member to be heard, and the threshold for congregational action remain the same. The Elders do not act as judge and jury alone; the keys are not theirs to wield apart from the body (Matt. 18:17-20).

8. Special Cases

8.1 Public or Scandalous Sin (1 Cor. 5)

When sin is already public — known broadly inside or outside the church — and the member is unrepentant, the Elders may compress or bypass the earliest steps. Paul does not require the Corinthian believer to be approached privately before judgment is pronounced. The order of Matthew 18 protects the offender's reputation; where the offender has already made the sin public, that protection is no longer in view.[\[5\]](#)

In such cases, the Elders move directly to a confidential appeal to the member, then (if needed) to an Elder evaluation under §6.3, and so on. The bylaws' standards of evidence and the church's threshold vote are not bypassed.

8.2 Doctrinal Error and Divisiveness (Titus 3:10-11; Rom. 16:17)

A member who teaches contrary to the church's Statement of Faith and Confessional Statement, who promotes division, or who refuses correction, falls under the standard of Titus 3:10-11. Two warnings (ordinarily, one private and one with witnesses) are followed by removal if the member persists. The same procedural safeguards apply: Elder evaluation, written appeal, opportunity to be heard, a two-thirds vote of the congregation under Bylaws I.A.5.f.3.

8.3 An Elder or Pastor Charged with Sin (1 Tim. 5:19-20)

The bylaws require a three-fourths ballot of the members present and voting to terminate the Senior Pastor (II.A.1.c.1). This framework supplies the procedural pathway by which a charge of sin against an Elder or Pastor is examined before that vote.

1. **Receipt of the charge.** Charges against an Elder are received in writing, normally by the Chair of the Board of Elders. If the Chair is the subject of the charge, by another Elder. If the matter concerns the Senior Pastor, by an Elder other than the Pastor.
2. **Two- or three-witness threshold.** Under 1 Tim. 5:19, no charge against an Elder is admitted "except on the evidence of two or three witnesses." The Elders confirm this threshold before proceeding to investigation.
3. **Investigation.** The remaining Elders, joined where appropriate by the Advisory Council of Previously Serving Elders (Bylaws II.B.1.d), and where appropriate by a trained Christian conciliator or qualified outside counsel, examine the matter. The accused Elder is afforded full opportunity to be heard and to bring a fellow believer for support. Where a conflict of interest is real or perceived (e.g., the accused is the Pastor), independent counsel is sought.
4. **Public rebuke if proven.** Where sin is established and unrepentant, 1 Tim. 5:20 calls for rebuke "in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear." The Elders bring the

matter to the gathered church with the same procedural protections as in §6.3, and (in the case of the Pastor) recommend termination under Bylaws II.A.1.c.1.

5. **Membership discipline.** Where the Elder remains a member but is removed from office, the question of membership discipline is addressed separately under §6 if needed. Removal from office does not entail removal from membership; nor does it prevent it where the underlying sin warrants.

8.4 Sins Implicating Civil Authority (Abuse, Crimes, Mandated Reporting)

Where a sin involves a credible allegation of physical, sexual, or other abuse — particularly of a minor or vulnerable adult — or any other crime, the Elders' first action, after immediate steps to ensure safety, is to comply with all applicable mandated-reporting and law-enforcement obligations under Massachusetts law.^[6] Reporting to civil authorities is not optional, not delayed for internal process, and not contingent on the outcome of any internal review (Rom. 13:1-7).

Internal church discipline proceeds in parallel with, and never as a substitute for, civil reporting. The Elders consult promptly with qualified counsel and with the church's insurance carrier. The Child Safety Policy of the Bylaws (Policy Page viii) governs operational steps in cases involving children.

8.5 The Member Who Withdraws Mid-Process

A member who, faced with discipline, requests release from membership under Bylaws I.A.5.c does not thereby halt the process. The Elders may, after patient appeal (the bylaws' "patiently and kindly endeavored to secure a continuance"), recommend that the church accept the withdrawal — but they may also, where the sin is grave and unrepentant, recommend that the church proceed to formal discipline notwithstanding the withdrawal, so that the church's testimony before God and its witness to the watching world is faithful.

9. Suspension of Privileges

Between the Elders' appeal and any formal action by the church, the Elders may, with grief and care, recommend that the member voluntarily suspend (or, where necessary, that the church direct the suspension of):

- Participation in the Lord's Supper;
- Participation in any teaching, ministry-leadership, or representative role;
- The exercise of the member's vote in business meetings.

Suspension is not removal; it is a pastoral restraint, intended to call the member to seriousness and to guard the church. Suspension is communicated in writing, with reasons, and is reviewed at every Elders' meeting until the matter is resolved.

10. Restoration

Restoration is the goal at every stage. Where a member repents — at any step, including after removal — the Elders' work is to receive, comfort, and reaffirm love (2 Cor. 2:5-11; Gal. 6:1).[\[7\]](#)

1. **Confirming repentance.** The Elders meet with the member to hear and confirm repentance. Repentance is not measured by tears or words alone, but by the disposition of the heart and, where time allows, by the fruit of changed conduct (Matt. 3:8; 2 Cor. 7:10-11).
2. **Restoration to membership.** Under Bylaws I.A.4.b.4(g), "Any person whose Membership has been terminated for any offense may have it restored by vote of the Church upon evidence of repentance and reformation." The Elders bring such a recommendation to the church at a duly called meeting, with a brief account (preserving appropriate confidentiality) of the evidence of repentance and reformation. The church receives the member back with rejoicing.
3. **Restoration to the Lord's Supper and ordinary fellowship.** Where suspension was used, the Elders communicate the lifting of suspension privately and, where appropriate, publicly.
4. **Restoration to office.** Restoration to any teaching or shepherding office is a separate question. Repentance restores fellowship; it does not automatically restore qualification (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). The Elders prayerfully consider qualification afresh, with appropriate time for the demonstration of fruit.

11. Confidentiality and Disclosure

Discipline matters are governed by a default of confidentiality, with disclosure only as the process requires.

1. **Steps One and Two.** Confidential to the parties and any witnesses, save for the Elders' confidential awareness at Step Two.
2. **Step Three.** Disclosure to the church is limited to what the church needs to know in order to obey, pray, and appeal. Names are stated; details of the sin are stated only as restraint and pastoral wisdom permit.
3. **Step Four (removal).** The fact of removal and the sin in general terms are communicated to the church. Sensitive operational details (e.g., the identity of victims) are protected.
4. **External disclosure.** The Elders do not disclose discipline matters outside the church except (1) where required by civil law (see §8.4); (2) to a sister church receiving a transferring member, with the member's consent or per the bylaws' arbitration provisions; or (3) to qualified counsel, insurance, or conciliators bound by professional confidentiality.
5. **Gossip.** Members are reminded that participation in discipline does not authorize gossip. The same charity to which the bylaws call us in Article I, Section A, ¶4 governs every conversation about the matter.

12. Documentation and Records

The Clerk maintains a confidential record of every formal discipline matter — the dates of Elder action, the dates and substance of correspondence with the member, the date of the church meeting and the vote, and the date and circumstance of any restoration. Records are retained under the church's records-management policy (Bylaws II.B.12.c.6) and are accessible to the Elders.

13. Relationship to the Bylaws and to Christian Conciliation

This framework is presented as a Policy under Article VI of the Bylaws, attached to the Bylaws upon adoption by the Board of Elders and approval by the church.

The Institute for Christian Conciliation arbitration provision in Bylaws I.A.4.b.4 remains the path for disputes over fact, interpretation, or grievance against the church. It is not a substitute for the Elders' duty to address unrepentant sin. The two provisions work together: the framework here governs the Elders' shepherding and the church's discipline; the arbitration provision provides a fair process where a member contests a decision or alleges injury.

14. The Elders' Duty of Care Throughout

At every stage, the Elders bear primary responsibility for:

- Praying earnestly for the member, both privately and corporately (James 5:16).
- Self-examining before correcting (Gal. 6:1).
- Maintaining tender, persistent, written and verbal appeal.
- Guarding the member's reputation as far as faithfulness permits.
- Caring for any victims and for the wider body throughout.
- Receiving repentance with rejoicing, at any point.

The Pastor, as the lead teaching Elder (Bylaws II.A.1.b.2), bears particular responsibility for ensuring that the church is taught in advance about discipline — so that when a matter comes before the body, the church has been prepared by the Word.

15. Adoption, Review, and Revision

This Policy is presented to the Board of Elders for approval, then attached to the Mayflower Constitution and Bylaws under Article VI upon approval by the church at a duly called meeting.

The Elders review this Policy annually. Proposed amendments are presented to the church for adoption. Where the Bylaws are amended in any respect that bears on this Policy, the Policy is reviewed and conformed within ninety days of the bylaw amendment.

Document control: Version 1.0 — May 2026 (initial draft, presented to the Board of Elders).

1. On the keys of the kingdom and the church's authority in discipline, see Jonathan Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregationalism* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 67-85; and Jonathan Leeman, *The Rule of Love: How the Local Church Should Reflect God's Love and Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 99-124. [↑](#)
2. On the distinction between formative and corrective discipline, see Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 28-31; cf. Mark E. Dever, *A Display of God's Glory: Basics of Church Structure* (Washington, DC: 9Marks, 2001), 31-37. [↑](#)
3. The five-fold criteria adapt and expand the practical guide in Leeman, *Church Discipline*, 53-59, with reference to Bylaws I.A.4.b.2(a) and the church covenant. [↑](#)
4. The four-commitment frame at Bylaws I.A.4.a (Glorify God, Get the Log Out, Gently Restore, Go and Be Reconciled) is drawn from Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 11-12. [↑](#)
5. John Calvin notes the same point: "the order of correction" in Matthew 18 protects the offender's reputation, and where the sin is already public, that protective ordering is no longer in view. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.12.6. [↑](#)
6. Massachusetts mandated reporters, including clergy in many circumstances, are governed by M.G.L. c. 119, § 51A. Mayflower's Child Safety Policy (Mayflower Constitution and Bylaws, Policy Page viii) operationalizes this duty. The Elders consult counsel and the church's insurance carrier promptly upon receipt of any abuse allegation. [↑](#)
7. On the integration of restoration with corrective discipline, see Sam Storms, *Pleasures Evermore: The Life-Changing Power of Knowing God* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2000), 173-88; and 2 Corinthians 2:5-11. [↑](#)