# 29. Church discipline and excommunication

**Often heard:** "Catholics excommunicate people for disagreeing with the pope." / "Baptists just kick people out of the local church."
**Also heard:** "With no authority above the local church, a member disciplined in one Baptist church can simply join another down the road."

## Discipline by the gathered local congregation

**HELD BY** Baptist

Each congregation exercises discipline over its members following Matt 18, up to removing them from membership, with the aim of restoration. There is no authority above the local church to discipline it, though associations and conventions may disfellowship churches.

**VERSES CITED**

Matt 18:15–17; 1 Cor 5:1–13; 2 Thess 3:6, 14–15; Titus 3:10; 2 Cor 2:6–8 (restoration).

**WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM**

Anabaptists made "the ban" central (Schleitheim, 1527, art. 2). Early Baptist church covenants and records show regular discipline; the practice declined sharply in the 20th century and has been revived in some circles (9Marks, from the 1990s).

## Discipline by bishops, pastors or church courts

**HELD BY** Catholic bishops; canon law · Orthodox bishops · Lutheran pastors, by the Word · Reformed elders and church courts · Anglican competent judge, curate · Methodist church trial

The Church's pastors can exclude members from the sacraments for grave, public, persistent sin or heresy, always as a medicinal penalty aimed at repentance; it does not mean the person is damned. Catholics and Orthodox give this power to the bishops; Lutherans to all who preside over churches, the Reformed to elders and church courts, Anglicans to a competent church judge, with the parish priest warning notorious sinners from the Table, and United Methodists to church trial under the Discipline. In Catholic canon law some penalties apply automatically for specific grave acts (for example, procuring an abortion or a bishop consecrating another without papal mandate). Excommunication is lifted when the person repents.

**VERSES CITED**

Matt 16:19; 18:15–18; 1 Cor 5:4–5; 1 Tim 1:20; Titus 3:10–11.

**EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY**

Penitential discipline for apostasy, murder and adultery is described by Tertullian, Cyprian and in the canons of Ancyra (314), canons 20–23 on adultery, abortion and homicide, and Nicaea (325), canons 11–14 on the lapsed and on penitents at the point of death.

**CATECHISM AND COUNCILS**

CCC 1463; Code of Canon Law can. 1331, 1364, 1387, 1397 §2 (numbered 1398 before the 2021 revision).

## Across the traditions

How each major tradition answers this question, in its own words and from its own documents.

### Catholic

Bishops may exclude members from the sacraments for grave, public, persistent sin or heresy as a medicinal penalty aimed at repentance, and some excommunications are incurred automatically for specific grave acts. The full case is set out above.

Sources: CCC 1463; Code of Canon Law can. 1331, 1387, 1397 §2.

### Orthodox

Impenitent sinners may be cut off from the Church by its visible authority, and the bishop binds and looses and excommunicates heretics. The ordinary discipline is penance (epitimia), which may mean extra fasting or, for grievous sins, suspension from Communion for a set time. Penitents are re-admitted to the sacraments after repentance.

Sources: Longer Catechism of St. Philaret, Q 269, 275, 352, 356; Confession of Dositheus, decree 10; Russian Orthodox Church, Bases of the Social Concept X.3.

### Lutheran

Lutherans keep excommunication only as a spiritual penalty: by the Word, "without human force," those whose wickedness is known may be excluded from communion. The Smalcald Articles reject the papal "greater" excommunication as a civil penalty and keep the "lesser" ban, which bars manifest and obstinate sinners from the Sacrament until they amend. This power belongs to all who preside over churches, not to bishops alone.

Sources: Augsburg Confession XXVIII; Smalcald Articles III.9; Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope 60, 74.

### Reformed

Christ gave the keys to church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate, who proceed by admonition, suspension from the Lord's Supper for a season, and excommunication, to reclaim offenders, deter others and keep the Church pure. Preaching and discipline are the two keys; the impenitent are excluded from the sacraments and received again on genuine reform. In the PCA, church courts may impose admonition, suspension, excommunication, or suspension or deposition from office.

Sources: Westminster Confession 30.1-4; Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 83-85; Belgic Confession 32; PCA Book of Church Order 30-1.

### Anglican

A person rightly excommunicated is to be taken by the faithful as "an Heathen and Publican" until openly reconciled by penance and received by a competent judge. The Prayer Book directs the curate to warn an "open and notorious evil liver" not to come to the Lord's Table until he has repented and amended his life.

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles XXXIII; BCP 1662, Holy Communion, opening rubrics.

### Methodist

Wesley's General Rules made a desire "to flee from the wrath to come" the one condition of membership. Members met weekly in classes of about twelve under a leader, and one who habitually broke the Rules was admonished and borne with for a season, but if he did not repent, "he hath no more place among us." The United Methodist Discipline still prints the Rules and lists offenses for which a professing member may be charged and tried.

Sources: The General Rules of the Methodist Church (1743), in UMC Book of Discipline 2020/2024, para. 104; Book of Discipline para. 2702.3.

### Baptist

Each congregation disciplines its own members following Matthew 18, up to removal from membership, with the aim of restoration; no authority above the local church disciplines it, though associations and conventions may disfellowship churches. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Matt 18:15-17; 1 Cor 5:1-13; Second London Confession (1689) 26.12.

**Where it gets contested:** Every tradition on this page practices discipline in principle, whether through the gathered congregation or through bishops, pastors, elders or church courts; discipline in each has been accused of being applied unevenly in practice.

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