

Chapter 6

Matthew 18:15-18: The Most Misapplied Passage on Church Conflict

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Introduction

In looking for a way out of conflict, many Christians and churches, with the best intentions, misuse and misapply Matthew 18. They confuse this judicial disciplinary process that occurs on an interpersonal level (“If your brother sins against you...” [v. 15]) with an all-inclusive model of peacemaking. This is a mistake. This passage on church discipline is specifically limited to cases of sin within a congregation of believers that is serious enough to remove a member from its fellowship (v. 17).^{*} Jesus’s words here were not intended and should not be used as a general model for all conflict resolution. If Matthew 18 is wrongly applied in this more general way, it will cause an intensification of the conflict instead of its resolution. The right procedure used in the wrong circumstances is the wrong procedure. Let us now consider what Matthew 18 says and when it should be called into play.

The right procedure used in the wrong circumstances is the wrong procedure.

Matthew 18:15-18

15 “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault,⁶⁴⁶ between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that *every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.*^{**} 17 If he refuses to

* Jesus said of the unrepentant member, “Let him be to you as a Gentile [or, pagan, as in the NIV] and a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17). To the Jewish audience to whom Jesus was speaking, this meant to have nothing to do with him.

** I have italicized these words because they represent a quotation from Deut. 19:15. The New King James Version encloses the words in quotation marks. The New American Standard version uses capitalization to indicate the quoted words.

listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

The Text Applies Only when Two Conditions Exist

A Charge of Sin

First, Matthew 18 applies only when unrepentant sin is involved. The passage begins with the conditional statement, “If your brother sins against you.” In the Greek, this is a third-class conditional sentence.⁶⁴⁷ What this means is that for the second part of the sentence to be fulfilled (“go and tell him his fault”), the first part of the sentence must occur (“your brother sins against you”). Jesus outlines the steps one is to take “if” your brother sins against you. But if your brother does not sin against you—if that condition is not fulfilled—then the subsequent steps are not to be fulfilled either.* If there is no charge of identifiable sin, the imposition of this passage for any other condition would be to misapply it.

The Presence of Eyewitnesses

Second, Matthew 18 applies only when there are at least two or three witnesses to the sin, *not* to a subsequent a conversation between the two disputants (see further below). The word *witness* is used in Matthew 18:16 in its “legal” sense.⁶⁴⁸ That is, the witness is “one who testifies in legal matters.”⁶⁴⁹ In “legal proceedings,” of which Matthew 18:16 is one,⁶⁵⁰ this person is a “witness to facts,” who can speak about those facts “from his own direct knowledge.”⁶⁵¹ This means that when a sufficient number of witnesses to the sin do not

* Indeed, each step of the entire process is conditional. Even if the process is started, only when additional conditions are fulfilled does a green light appear to proceed to the next step.

exist, the process cannot move forward. Note the Old Testament text from which Jesus quoted.

Deuteronomy 19:15

A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. *Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.*⁶⁵²

In Jesus's day and prior throughout the history of Israel, a single eyewitness, even to murder, was not sufficient evidence or testimony to convict a person of a crime.

Numbers 35:30 (see also Deuteronomy 17:6)

If anyone kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death on the evidence of witnesses. But no person shall be put to death on the testimony of one witness.

In the Jewish culture of both the Old and New Testament eras, stringent guidelines were set forth to insure that false accusations and convictions did not occur. "In the judicial procedure outlined in the OT one witness was not adequate for personal testimony against anyone, but two or three witnesses were required (Dt. 17:6, 19:15). This principle was ingrained in Jewish law and is reiterated in the NT (cf. Mat. 18:16, 2 Cor. 13:1)."⁶⁵³ Indeed, this principle was so thoroughly established that we find it reiterated in the first century by Jews of the Qumran community (those who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls),⁶⁵⁴ among the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus,⁶⁵⁵ and among the rabbis.

The rabbis in Jesus's day were particularly conscientious when it came to credible and reliable witness testimony. Certain occupations disqualified one from even being a witness.⁶⁵⁶ If one was a close relative to the accused, that person was disqualified.⁶⁵⁷ One who was either a friend or enemy of the accused was disqualified.⁶⁵⁸ Moreover, the degree of certainty required by a witness was very high. The

witness had to accurately recall the year, month, week, day, time of day, and place where the infraction occurred.⁶⁵⁹ If there were significant discrepancies among the witnesses over such details, the case would be thrown out.⁶⁶⁰ Such rules were intended to confirm the accuracy of one's memory and screen out testimony that could lead to the conviction of an innocent defendant based on tainted testimony. Though some of the rules may have made the bar for evidence to be considered too high, keep in mind that the prohibition against false testimony was incorporated in the Ten Commandments: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exod. 20:16; see also Mark 10:19). Undergirding the rabbinic traditions was their strong desire to conform to the ninth commandment.

Jesus, a Jewish theologian⁶⁶¹ who was well aware of rabbinic practices (e.g., Matt. 5:20-48), reaffirmed Old Testament law in Matthew 18:16 and felt no need to modify it. Rather, "the use of witnesses shows the link between the Messianic kingdom and the Israelite community of the Old Testament period."⁶⁶² The guidelines for the church carry the clear message that unless there are two or three witnesses to the act or event in question, a given case cannot move forward.

It is also important to keep in mind the possibility that the aggrieved party may be wrong in his or her accusation. Without witnesses, the evidence upon which the church as a whole is able to make a binding judgment against the alleged wayward member would be absent. As it was in the Old Testament, so it is in the New Testament. "The biblical requirement of additional witnesses safeguards the judicial process against false accusation, slander, and wrongful incrimination."⁶⁶³ The witnesses must agree if called upon to confirm the charge of sin. Without such evidence, the process Jesus instituted would, by design, have to stop. "Strict judicial procedures are being followed at this point because a judicial action is about to take place."⁶⁶⁴

Here is a statement in the bylaws of one church that has it right: "It is important to understand who qualifies as a witness and what

their function is in the disciplinary process. Biblically, a witness is a person who bears testimony of another's wrongdoing based on firsthand knowledge. A person is not constituted a witness who bears testimony based on hearsay, gossip, or secondhand knowledge (Deuteronomy 19:15-19). The Bible condemns false witnesses (Exodus 20:13). Accusations not substantiated by two or three witnesses must be left to the One who knows all things and judges righteously (Numbers 35:30; Psalm 51:3-4)."

Although reconciliation is the ultimate goal of Matthew 18, if there is no repentance for sin, believers "must gather evidence in the proper order in case they later need proof of what transpired."⁶⁶⁵ The final disposition would be removal from the fellowship of the church (vv. 17-18). "The community is authorized to determine whether a sinning disciple continues with the community or is excluded. ... Repentance leads to loosing or forgiveness, and continued fellowship. The lack of repentance leads to binding, or retention of sin, and exclusion from the community."⁶⁶⁶

How Matthew 18 Is Misinterpreted and Misapplied

The improper use or application of Matthew 18 centers on the word *sin* and the word *witness*. The misinterpretations associated with these words are discussed below.

“If Your Brother Sins Against You”—Common Misinterpretation

The first misinterpretation sees Matthew 18 as providing an outline for resolving every form of conflict. That is to say, all conflict, regardless of whether or not sin is involved, is crammed into a process that was intended to have a very narrow application.

An article about church conflict endorsed by one evangelical denomination began by discussing church conflict of various kinds,

stating, “People become dissatisfied with the way church leadership spends money, with a youth program which doesn’t meet the needs of their children, with the style of worship or preaching,” etc.⁶⁶⁷ The article ended by saying that such church problems should be funneled through Matthew 18 for resolution. This conclusion, however, is unsupportable. Having a difference over how leadership prioritizes spending is not a matter of sin anymore than Paul and Barnabas’s major conflict over whether or not to take Mark on their second missionary journey was a matter of sin (Acts 15:36-41).⁶⁶⁸ Matthew 18 is triggered only when one person is being charged with doing wrong against another.

“Two or Three Witnesses”–Common Misinterpretation

There are those who identify the two or three witnesses, not as eyewitnesses of the sinful act being charged, but only as witnesses of the conversation the aggrieved party has with the one he or she is charging with sin. One commentator wrote, “These are not witnesses of the original wrong-doing but of the wronged person’s attempts at reconciliation, and of the response the wrong-doer makes to them. They will be able to certify that the one has honestly tried to bring the other to a better mind, and that the other has or has not yielded to his efforts. If this fails, the wronged person is to ‘tell it to the Church.’”⁶⁶⁹

In terms of uncovering the truth, such an interpretation of the text will not get you there. For example, if John charges Lyle with sin and Lyle denies the allegation, what good are witnesses to the conversation? Such witnesses do nothing to establish the truth. Moreover, how can someone be protected against false accusation if all that is needed to establish the charge as true are witnesses at the time the accusation is made? What if the one bringing the allegation is himself mistaken or even dishonest? As a third-class conditional statement (in the Greek), there is an element of uncertainty inherent in the statement, “if your brother sins against you.”⁶⁷⁰ It is not certain that he has. Yet under the above interpretation, the one

who accuses the other first wins. If John charges Lyle with sin first privately and then in front of “witnesses” and Lyle denies it privately to John and then later in front of others, his denial would be seen as clear evidence of an unrepentant heart. If the matter is taken to the church, then Lyle’s continued denials of the charge will serve only to further demonstrate his obstinacy. This will then lead to his removal from fellowship. Ironically, witnesses of the conversation are actually instrumental in causing a new conflict. The original charge becomes irrelevant. It now becomes all about the response the alleged wrongdoer makes in front of the witnesses. This interpretation of Matthew 18:16 leads to its misapplication, and rather than finding resolution to the problem, it will make it worse.

“Two or Three Witnesses”—Drastic Misinterpretation

There is another, even more drastic, misinterpretation of the text. Popularized by Peacemaker Ministries, the very meaning of the word *witness* is changed into something entirely different, as the word is made to mean “mediator.” In reference to Matthew 18:16, we read, “The role that these ‘one or two others’ are fulfilling is sometimes referred to as ‘mediation.’... a mediator works with both sides to help them move toward a voluntary agreement.”⁶⁷¹ The concept of mediator, inserted into Matthew 18:16, is then expanded to include fifteen additional roles these one or two others can play.⁶⁷² They are: (1) intercessor, (2) convener, (3) facilitator of communication and understanding, (4) model, (5) referee and protector, (6) trust builder, (7) resource expander, (8) generator of alternatives, (9) reality tester, (10) teacher and counselor, (11) encourager and coach, (12) confronter and exhorter, (13) proclaimer of forgiveness, (14) closer, (15) witness (in the sense described in the section above). Arbitrator and reconciler are additional roles this person can be asked to play, according to this understanding of Matthew 18:16.⁶⁷³

The extent to which a single word with a clearly defined

meaning has been commandeered to mean so many different things is stunning. It is also misleading. On what basis can the clear meaning of a single word be transformed into a multitude of textually unsupportable ones? If Jesus wanted to use a different word than *witness* in Matthew 18:16, he could have. He did not have to quote from Deuteronomy 19:15 to make his point, but he did. To later come along and alter the very essence of what he intended, without a shred of textual basis to do so, eviscerates the process Jesus established. It results in a misuse and misapplication of this important passage.

Getting a Clearer Understanding

Lest there be any doubt about the meaning of the word *witness*, let us see how Matthew used it elsewhere in his book and how the apostle Paul used it in 1 Timothy 5. Charges of wrongdoing are the subject in both instances.

Matthew 26:59-66

59 Now the chief priests and the whole Council were seeking false testimony⁶⁷⁴ against Jesus that they might put him to death, 60 but they found none, though many false witnesses⁶⁷⁵ came forward 61 and said, “This man said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.’” 62 And the high priest stood up and said, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?” 63 But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” 64 Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” 65 Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses⁶⁷⁶ do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. 66 What is your judgment?” They answered, “He deserves death.”

At Jesus's trial, false witnesses were offering false testimony in an attempt to manufacture grounds to put Jesus to death. That failed because too many details among them were not in agreement (see Mark 15:54). What sealed the verdict against Jesus were the words he spoke in front of his accusers. They now no longer needed witnesses. They became the witnesses. They had proof positive, because they knew from their own firsthand knowledge what Jesus said and who he claimed to be.

Now let us turn to the writings of the apostle Paul.

1 Timothy 5:19-20.

19 Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. 20 As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.

This is an important passage because it parallels Matthew 18. The word translated "rebuke" in 1 Timothy 5:20 is the exact same word Jesus used in Matthew 18:15 that is translated "show him his fault." (The word also could be translated in Matt. 18:15, "rebuke him."⁶⁷⁷) In other words, if the common (mis)interpretation for Matthew 18:15-16 were applied to 1 Timothy 5, its lack of viability becomes even more apparent. Should one uncorroborated charge against an elder or pastor be allowed to stand simply because it was leveled in the presence of witnesses? Pastors, in particular, need every protection against false accusations. One minister observed, "Many a pastor has had his ministry destroyed over accusations that could not be proven false, though they were."⁶⁷⁸ The apostle Paul states that a charge should not be admitted or entertained unless there are witnesses, that is, witnesses of the sin, not witnesses of the charge! "It was of utmost importance to safeguard innocent men from false accusations, and as Jewish law required the agreement of two witnesses before a man might be called upon to answer a charge (cf. Dt. 19:15), so it must be in the church (cf. Mt. 18:16, 2 Cor. 13:2), especially when an elder is implicated."⁶⁷⁹ The idea that these

witnesses are mediators and the like (see “drastic misinterpretation” above) requires no further discussion since there is no basis upon which to even consider it.

Other passages in the New Testament that use the word *witness* in a judicial sense⁶⁸⁰ include the following.

Acts 6:11-13

11 Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” 12 And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, 13 and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law.

Acts 7:58

Then they cast him [Stephen] out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

2 Corinthians 13:1

This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

Hebrews 10:28

Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

Summary

Matthew 18 is a critically important passage that instructs the church on how to deal with sin on an interpersonal level that is serious enough to remove an unrepentant member from fellowship. The passage outlines the formal process for church discipline, using

the word *witness* in its legal sense.⁶⁸¹ Two or three eyewitnesses of past wrongdoing are required when sin is being charged. Without such witnesses, the judicial process as outlined in Matthew 18 cannot proceed. Before someone can be expelled from a church, evidence for the basis of that expulsion from multiple sources must be secured. If all the conditions of the passage can be met, it should by all means be used.

Matthew 18 is not applicable for resolving differences of opinion and other kinds of problems. When this judicial, church discipline process is inappropriately applied, for example, for differences of opinion over church goals, policies, allocation of resources, building projects, etc., expect an escalation of the conflict, even a church split. Using Matthew 18 for the majority of conflicts that typically emerge in a church is like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. It is the wrong process.

The Judeo-Christian model of peacemaking should be utilized for all situations when Matthew 18 cannot or should not be used. This model of peacemaking is based on the process that God established to make peace with all of humanity. It can and should be used both inside and outside the church.