

Conflict Resolution in the Church

A Study of Matthew 18:15ff

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Introduction

Professing Christians desire peace in the body of Christ. Many acknowledge that peace and purity can only be maintained through biblical church discipline. Matthew 18:15ff is a crucial passage for preserving the peace and concord of believers, because in it, Christ sets forth the steps necessary for dealing with sin between believers. Although this portion of Scripture is often referred to in our day by believers, it is seldom followed by church governors and members. Therefore, let us carefully consider these words spoken by Christ, and put them into practice. Sin and conflict in the church are inevitable. But, if we handle sin Christ's way: peace, sanctification and the preserving of reputations will be the result. If we handle sin our way, we can expect chaos, warfare and divisions in the church.

Context

Before we examine the text, let us first note the context. These verses which deal with a sinning brother are given within a section of teaching that deals with concern for the little ones of the kingdom, saving lost sheep, forgiving our brethren and so on. All of chapter 18 was spoken at one time in one discourse by Jesus Christ. Christ's Galilean ministry was coming to a close. This was Jesus' final visit to Capernaum. This whole discourse arose out of the disciples' faulty concept of the kingdom and the disciples' egotistical concern of who out of themselves would be the greatest or most exalted one in Christ's coming kingdom, which in their minds at this time, was a kingdom of earthly glory and power.

Jesus focuses their attention away from themselves and personal glory, to humility, to a concern for the little ones of the kingdom, to hatred of sin, and to reconciliation and forgiveness. Greatness in Christ's kingdom is not anything like greatness according to the world. It is not to be a great lord, pope or bishop, ruling over the flock like a dictator or mighty general, but it is to be as a little child who sits upon our savior's lap in humble trust, dependence and love for Him.

The rest of chapter 18 follows this theme of true greatness through humility and concern for God's people: God's little ones. There is a need to guard and protect the little ones and ourselves from stumbling (verses 6-9). There is the need to rescue the little ones who stumble, to consider them precious and to seek them out when they stray (verses 10-14). There is a need to confront the sinning brother in a humble, loving manner. And not to give up, but follow every

step necessary to win him to repentance (verses 15-20). And in response to Peter's question, Christ discusses the need to forgive the repentant brother (verses 22-35). Our text logically follows the passage regarding rescuing the straying brother as well as logically precedes the section on forgiving our brother.

Step Number One

Let us now examine the first step in reconciliation with a brother who sins against you: "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother (v. 15)." There are several things to note regarding this verse.

First, note that Christ is speaking about a brother. Therefore, this passage only applies to Christians, to believers. If an unbeliever sins against you, biblically you are not obligated to seek reconciliation with him. Paul does say: "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men." (Romans 12:18) Christians should do everything possible within the parameters of God's law to get along with the heathen. And of course believers should not bad mouth and hate unbelievers. But, unbelievers are not part of the body of Christ and are not under the authority of the church. Thus, the three-step pattern of church discipline does not apply to them. In the world, unbelievers often sin against Christians. And often the best thing for the Christian to do is to just forget about it and move on. But when a Christian brother sins against you in such a way that simply cannot be covered over with love—ignoring the sin is not an option. Sin must be dealt with or it will eventually destroy the purity and peace of the church.

Second, note that Christ is talking about sin. "If a brother sins...." The Greek word used is hamartia which literally means to miss the mark. The mark or standard missed is God's holy law. Jesus uses the aorist tense which indicates a specific act of sinning. To paraphrase the intent of the original language we could say: "If a Christian brother clearly misses the mark so that his conduct toward you is a violation of God's holy law, go and tell him his fault, etc."

The fact that Christ is discussing real sin, an actual violation of God's law is important for two reasons. 1.) It means that Christians should not take offense over personality differences, cultural differences, socioeconomic differences and so on. "Furthermore, there are many rubs and offenses that occur in life that may not be directly the result of sin. Some Christians are offended over trivial matters that are not sins at all. Proverbs 10:12 says: 'Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers a multitude of sins.' Plainly every rub and offense cannot be raised and settled. We must learn in love, to forgive and pass by many slights, annoyances and offenses."¹ "Much heart breaking and much needless trouble often comes of 'offenses' which exist only in the imagination. A 'sensitive' disposition is often only another name for someone who is uncharitable, unforbearing, and suspicious of others without real cause. The professing believer who has a judgmental, suspicious spirit often is guilty of imputing bad motives to others where

¹ Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), p. 52.

none exist, and of finding sinister—malevolent meanings in the most innocent acts.”² God saves all sorts of people, people who you may think are weird, odd, strange, or whatever. Remember, Christ is talking about sin.

2.) The fact that Christ is talking about real sin means that personal charges against a brother must be objectively proved from the Bible. Here Christ protects believers from legalism, subjectivism and all arbitrary human standards.³ Thus, if you are going to go to your brother and accuse him of sin you better make sure it is a real sin and not some subjective feeling, etc. If someone accuses you of sin and you aren’t sure of what you did wrong, ask for scriptural proof. This principle seems rather obvious, yet, it is constantly violated in churches today. People are chided and harassed for many things that have nothing to do with sin and everything to do with legalistic, subjective nonsense. Christ is talking about sin. If offenses are not based on God’s law but only upon human opinion or imagination, this should be discovered during the three-step judicial process.

Third, note that the sin committed is personal, that it is against you (singular). Christ is discussing private offenses and not public sins. If the sin is committed against you alone, or if you observe a brother commit a sin in private, then you are required to keep the matter private and go to your brother, etc. Public sins are handled in a different manner. A sin that is public and known by the whole church requires a public rebuke and repentance.⁴ The expression “against you” distinguishes between secret and open sins. John Calvin says: “For if any man shall offend against the whole Church, Paul enjoins that he be publicly reprov’d, so that even elders shall not be spared; for it is in reference to them that he expressly enjoins Timothy, to rebuke them publicly in the presence of all, and thus to make them a general example to others, (1 Tim v. 20). And certainly it would be absurd that he who has committed a public offense, so that the disgrace of it is generally known, should be admonished by individuals; for, if a thousand persons are aware of it, he ought to receive a thousand admonitions. The distinction, therefore, which Christ expressly lays down, ought to be kept in mind, that no man may bring disgrace upon his brother by rashly, and without necessity, divulging secret offenses.”⁵

² John Monro Gibson, Ed., W. Robertson Nicoll, *The Expositor’s Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1943), Vol. 4 p. 762.

³ Many Christians in our day have a negative unscriptural view of God’s holy law. This is due primarily to the popularity of Dispensationalism and the rise of unbiblical pietism (e.g., escape from societal and social responsibilities). The moral law, however, when used lawfully gives men great freedom from ecclesiastical and political tyranny. People can only be disciplined for violating Scripture. Whenever a source of authority is placed alongside of the Bible, such as tradition (e.g., Roman Catholicism) or extra-biblical revelation (e.g., the charismatic movement), the rule of Biblical law is circumvented and tyranny rears its head. If you are accused of something and you do not know or think you did anything wrong, ask for the details of what you did, and specific Bible references forbidding your behavior. If you are accused of something more difficult to pin down, such as arrogance or being unloving, ask for specific details of arrogant or unloving acts or words (get it in writing if possible). Ecclesiastical tyrants often resort to vague unverifiable charges to silence critics and those who disagree with their positions, etc.

⁴ “Admonition and public rebuke of sinners is a divine Ordinance of Christ (*Matt. 18:15-17; Jn 20:23). One way and degree of binding is by authoritative convincing reproof—1 Th. 5:14; 1 Tim. 5:20; Titus 1:13; 2 Cor. 2:6)” (Samuel Rutherford, *The Divine Right of Church-Government* [Dallas, TX: Naphtali, 1995 (1646, 1654)], p. 65).

⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), Vol xvi, p. 353.

There is a principle gathered from this passage regarding the extent to which the sins of other believers may be discussed with others who have not witnessed any sinful behavior. Unless a sin is of such a gross scandalous nature that makes it an inevitable public scandal (e.g., murder, civil crimes, etc.); then, if a sin is witnessed by a small circle of believers, these believers should deal with the problem privately and not spread the matter before the whole church. “The Bible indicates that a sin ought to be confessed as widely as the sin’s direct effects extend (cf. Matt. 18:15ff.)”⁶ Furthermore, if a sin is committed before two to three people the matter is already at step number two; for there is no need to gather witnesses. If the small group of people cannot achieve reconciliation, they may go directly to the elders of the church.

A second principle or application regarding the personal nature of the offense “against you” regards busybodies. If a Christian overhears a conversation between two believers in which he thinks something offensive was said by one believer to another, it is the person’s responsibility to whom the statement was directed to either overlook the matter in love or confront the person who made the statement. The person who overheard the conversation has no business taking offense and spreading the matter around the church when the person to whom the statement was made has not taken offense and would like to drop the matter altogether. If you believe that a brother is covering a sin that is so serious that you think it needs to be dealt with, then go to him privately and discuss it. But Christians who go about the church and meddle in affairs that should not concern them are gossips and busybodies and unnecessarily disturb the peace of Christ’s church.

Fourth, note the offended brother is to go and confront the brother who sinned alone.⁷ “You, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.” (vs. 15) This is the first command in our text. This is a divine imperative from the lips of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, the three-step procedure for dealing with a brother who has committed sin is not optional for believers. These are not suggestions. These are not just words of advice. Every Christian, every elder, every pastor and every church court must strictly obey Christ’s instructions. No excuse is acceptable for violating this passage.

The verb (*elegxon*) translated in various translations as convict, tell, reprove, or show, means to rebuke so as to bring conviction. One is to rebuke or confront with the purpose of bringing sin home to the conscience; to awaken the person to a consciousness of guilt. One thing important to note regarding Christ’s command to go, is that the offended party is responsible to go. You do not wait for the offending brother to come to you. You must seek him out and speak directly to him.⁸ If you are the one who has been wronged, why does Christ

⁶ Jay E. Adams, *More than Redemption: A Theology of Christian Counseling* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), p. 219.

⁷ Christ here assumes that the parties involved are adults. Parents should be told when their children act wickedly. If a covenant child curses a neighbor and throws a rock through his window, the parents of that child should be told.

⁸ Christ teaches that both parties, the one who was wronged and the one who committed the offense, are obligated to seek the other person in order to achieve reconciliation. “Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift...” (Matt. 5:23-24). For Christ, the time for reconciliation is always *right now*. The responsibility is always *your* responsibility. “From all this, it is here inferred,

demand that you take the initiative? Because Christian love always regards the welfare of a brother as more important than oneself. Remember, the whole context of our passage is humility and concern for the little ones of the kingdom. Christ has just spoken about the lost sheep and about the need to go to great lengths to rescue the one stray lamb.

How are you to approach the sinning brother? First, you are to approach your brother in a spirit of Christian love and humility.⁹ You are to go as a physician to a patient or as a Shepherd goes after lost sheep. Philippians 2:3-4: “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.” You do not go to your brother to punish and humiliate but to help and to save. Receiving personal justice and satisfaction for our hurt feelings takes second place to seeing our brother repent. Any professing believer who takes a gleeful satisfaction in the downfall and public humiliation of other professing Christians is not acting in accordance with the spirit of love, concern, and humility which runs throughout chapter 18.

Second, you are to go and point out your brother’s sin in a calm rational manner. You are there to convince, to win over your brother. You will almost certainly not succeed at your task if you lose control of your temper and insult or mock your brother. Acting like an arrogant jerk is not the way to convince anyone. “Christian reproof is an ordinance of Christ for the bringing of sinners to repentance.”¹⁰ It is not a debating society or contest. Remember, this is your brother for whom Christ died. No matter what he has done, place him above yourself. Do not act in an unseemly manner or in any way that would unnecessarily jeopardize your mission.

Third, although our text assumes that actual sin has been committed, no matter how convinced in your own mind of the justice of your cause, you must carefully listen to and weigh your brother’s argument. (This assumes of course that he doesn’t immediately agree with you and repent.) Christians have been mistaken on many occasions; therefore, you must carefully examine your brother’s case. You must consider the possibility that your accusation may be a mistake. Even if you believe that you have an open and shut case, you must give your brother a thorough opportunity to respond. “The one raising the issue must be prepared (have a mindset) to hear new evidence, and show a willingness to give his brother the benefit of the doubt. In effect, he says, ‘Here are the data that I have, now let me hear your side of the story.’”¹¹ Colossians

that we ought carefully to preserve Christian love and peace with all our brethren, and that if at any time a breach happens, we should labour for a reconciliation, by confessing our fault, humbling ourselves to our brother, begging his pardon, and making restitution, or offering satisfaction for wrong done in word or deed according as the nature of the thing is” (Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* [McLean, VA: Macdonald, n.d.], Vol. V, p. 59). Jay Adams says that ideally the two parties should meet each other on the way to the other’s house.

⁹ The Christian has a responsibility to speak in a way that promotes healing and leads to edification. “There is one who speaks like the piercing of a sword, but the tongue of the wise promotes health” (Prov. 12:18). “Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones” (Prov. 16:24). “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” (Prov. 25:11). The Apostle Paul had much more in mind than curse words when he said, “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such as a word as is good for edification, according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Eph. 4:29).

¹⁰ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. V, p. 259.

¹¹ Jay E. Adams, *More than Redemption*, p 227.

3:12-13: “Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.”

Fourth, you are to go alone; that is, in private. Christ has set up a very good rule in His church for His people “that Christians should not speak of our brother’s faults to others, ’till we have first spoken about them to that person personally, and privately.”¹² Proverbs 11:13: “A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter.” Proverbs 26:20: “Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases.” There are a number of reasons that going alone is the best and most biblical course of action.

The first reason for reproving your brother in private is to protect the reputation of your brother.¹³ It is natural for earthly, blood brothers to look out for each other’s welfare and to be concerned about each other’s reputation. Earthly brothers often go out of their way to squash gossip and rumors that besmirch the reputation of another family member.

As Christians we often fail to recognize the importance and significance of our brotherhood in Christ. Earthly brothers are held together by blood, by parentage. But Christian brothers are one in Jesus Christ, regenerated and brought together by the Spirit of God. Our relationship to each other is spiritual, permanent and is a public testimony of our commitment to Jesus Christ. Speaking of those who clothed, fed and gave water to His people, Jesus said: “Assuredly, I say to you, in as much as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” (Matt. 25:40). Christ so identifies Himself with His body, the church, that to care for His people is to care for Him; that to persecute His people is to persecute Him; that to ignore the needs of His people is to ignore Him. Thus for believers to ignore Christ’s command to go privately to our brother and instead seriously damage his reputation through gossip is a great sin. It shows a lack of love and concern for our brother. You must show more of a concern for the reputation of your brother than even for your own reputation. 1 John 3:14-15: “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother

¹² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. V, p. 259.

¹³ A passage of Scripture related to Matthew 18:15-16 is Leviticus 19:16-17: “You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people; nor shall you take a stand against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD. You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him.” The term translated talebearer *r_kil* can also be translated as spreading slander (cf. Prov. 11:13; 20:19; Jer. 6:28; 9:3). Leviticus 19:15 states in a negative form what Christ commands in a positive form. If a matter is kept private, gossip and slander cannot occur. “Gossip and idle taking, and meddling with our neighbor (being *allotrioepiskopoi*, Pet. iv. 15), and more directly still, insinuating and hinting evil of him, are sins forbidden here. . . . If a brother defame us, or slight us, or give us cause for grief and anger, we are to tell it to the person face to face. There must be not self-satisfaction, as if you were in this better than he. Even for his sake, the evil must not be left on him” (Andrew Bonar, *Leviticus* [Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966 (1846)], p. 349). Even if a brother is truly guilty of a sin, if the matter is spread without biblical due process then that brother’s reputation is ruined because the law was not followed. “If a ‘brother’ or ‘neighbor’ is actually guilty of wrong-doing, we must go to him and seek to dissuade him from his evil course. Otherwise, we ‘suffer sin upon him,’ or ‘so thou bear not sin on his account,’ i.e., we become an accomplice to his evil by our silence” (R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973], p 596). Thus both passages look out for a brother’s reputation and are concerned with his personal sanctification. The law equates the spreading of damaging information about a brother with hating your brother. God regards gossip and slander as serious offenses and not just as idle chit-chat.

abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.” Woe unto you Christian if you ignore Christ’s command and damage the reputation of your brother for whom Christ died.

Another reason to go to your brother privately is to protect your own reputation. Christians are not infallible. Sometimes Christians are totally wrong concerning the behavior of a brother. Believers have heard wrong, misunderstood statements and actions and so on. Sometimes Christians have a poor knowledge of God’s word and law, and regard things to be sins which are not sins at all. Thus, if you go to your brother privately and discuss the matter and discover that your perception and/or accusation are wrong, then you can ask for forgiveness (if necessary) and reconcile. The issue is settled right there, privately, and no harm of reputation comes to you or your neighbor. If one does not follow Christ’s command and spreads false and damaging information around the church about a brother, then whose reputation will be seriously damaged when the truth is discovered? The accuser’s! The accuser will suffer a loss of trust and credibility in the congregation. Thus the accuser’s ability to admonish others and minister in the body will be curtailed until trust is restored.

A third reason to go to your brother privately is to preserve the peace of the church. Often when accusations are leveled against a brother behind his back and spread throughout the church and the accuser and accused disagree, factions will develop within the church. People have a tendency to take sides in a dispute. When those on opposite sides become heated and obstinate often the result in a serious schism among the brethren. How many churches have a split because someone did not obey Christ’s simple command to go to a brother privately and keep the matter secret? Such divisions often take years to heal. It is a great sin to bring dissention and strife into the body of Christ. Elders have a solemn responsibility to ensure that Christ’s instructions are followed. Those who disobey Christ and bring strife and bitterness into the church must be rebuked publicly before all. When church rulers know that Christ’s command has been violated and yet do nothing, they are partly to blame for the chaos this brings to Zion. Church courts must insist that Matthew 18:15ff be followed.

Fourth, sins are to be kept private and dealt with immediately in order not to bring reproach on the name of Jesus Christ. Christians are Christ’s representatives to the world. They are to set an example before the heathen of the power of Christ to save and sanctify. When professing believers treat each other in a manner inconsistent with the Gospel, the world notices and mocks both Christ and His church. David’s murder of Uriah and his adultery with his wife Bathsheba gave “great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme” (2 Sam. 12:14). Calvin says of this verse: “they had their mouths at the ready to curse God and His church. Now we see here that although God hates fornication and every other crime, He values His honor so much that when we expose His name to shame by unbelievers, that it is a much more dreadful sin than any other that we could commit—for unbelievers are just waiting for an opportunity to make fun of true religion, and spit out blasphemies against God, and so crude remarks are on the

tip of their tongues, like torches ready to set their rage aflame.”¹⁴ Therefore, when Christians do not follow Christ’s command and act with contempt for their brothers and the church courts, they dishonor Christ by their gross hypocrisy.

The Goal—Reconciliation

Why are you to go to your brother? As noted, you are there to convince your brother of his guilt. You are there to achieve a biblical reconciliation. The passage says: “If he hears you, you have gained your brother.” Which means that the erring brother has agreed with you, admitted his sin and that you are now reconciled with your brother. But what constitutes a biblical reconciliation?

Note, whenever sin is involved it is simply not enough to say “I’m sorry” or “I apologize.” Jay Adams explains why: “An apology is an inadequate humanistic substitute for the real thing. Nowhere do the Scriptures require, or even encourage, apologizing. To say ‘I’m sorry’ is a human dodge for doing what God has commanded.”¹⁵ The biblical response is to say: “Yes, I am guilty. I have sinned against you. Will you forgive me?” The reason that an apology is inadequate when actual sin has occurred is because it does not elicit a proper biblical response. When a Christians admits his guilt and then says: “Will you forgive me?” the Christian who has come to confront him regarding his sin must say: “Yes, I forgive you.” This places the ball in his court. He must either explicitly forgive or openly rebel against God. When the brother says, “I forgive you,” he promises never to bring the matter up against you; never to bring the matter up again to others (even his wife); and never to bring the matter up to himself by dwelling on it and dredging up bitterness, etc.¹⁶ This, beloved is biblical reconciliation. Apologies are fine when sin is not involved (e.g., when you accidentally bump into someone at the shopping mall) but they should never be used as a substitute for biblical reconciliation.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel: Chapters 1-13* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), p. 579. If anyone has any doubts as to whether the modern world notices the behavior of the church then just look at the news coverage of Jim Bakker’s sexual and financial escapades and the coverage of Jimmy Swaggert’s sexual exploits. When a Yogi, Swami or Buddhist sleeps with a prostitute it may get a spot on *A Current Affair* or a paragraph in a tabloid but when a prominent “Christian” preacher falls into the mire, CBS, ABC, NBC and CNN have a field day. *Nightline* spent several days covering the fall of the two fornicating Jimmies.

¹⁵ Jay E. Adams, *More than Redemption*, p. 221.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 222. We must keep in mind that according to the New Testament, to be reconciled to another believer does not mean primarily to have wonderful warm kind feelings toward another person but to first be restored to favor. Christians who are reconciled may not have warm fuzzy feelings at first. But, if they do not bring up the matter to anyone, even to themselves, and treat the other brother *lawfully*, good loving feelings will eventually follow. We are to be biblically-directed and not feeling-directed. If a Christian says to himself, “I will not reconcile to ‘Bob’ until I feel it,” he is placing his fallen emotional state above God’s word.

Step Number Two

What if you go to your brother and make a real effort to convince him of his sin and he rejects your counsel? What is the next step? Verse 16: “But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses’ every word may be established.”

The Christian must not give up. Christ commands you to take one or two other Christians with you as witnesses and then reprove your brother again. The bringing of one or two other believers serves two purposes.

Provides Witnesses

The main reason is to provide witnesses. Christ quotes Deuteronomy 19:15: “In order that by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established.” A man is not to be condemned solely on the account of one witness. It is important to note that these additional witnesses are not witnesses to the sin committed (for the text is discussing a sin committed to only one person) but are to be witnesses to the reconciliation process. They are there to certify that a sincere effort was made at reconciliation by the one wronged, and if need be, to serve as witnesses before the church if the wrong-doer refuses to admit guilt and to reconcile.

If the witnesses are there to witness the reconciliation process and have not actually witnessed the wrong-doing, then what is to be done if the one who is said to have committed sin, explicitly denies the fact and declares that he is falsely and slanderously accused? If a person who professes Christ, is a blatant liar, or is living in obstinate and rebellious self-deception, Calvin argues that he should be left alone. The witnesses cannot ascertain objectively which party is lying and thus it is better to let the matter go rather than convict an innocent person. “And how could I argue with a man who boldly denies the whole matter? For he who has the effrontery to deny the crime which he has committed shuts the door against a second admonition.”¹⁷ However, there is the possibility that when confronted with two or three witnesses the denier may repent or give forth inconsistent testimony, etc. Also, it may be wise to bring witnesses in case the accused one (who is lying) brings up the issue with others in the future. Thus, at least there would be a public record of the charge and counter-charge. In any event such instances of blatant denial are thankfully quite rare.

Increases Brotherly Persuasion

Bringing along one to two witnesses serves many functions. One purpose is to increase brotherly persuasion against the accused. If the witnesses ascertain that a sin has been committed, they are to reason with the offender and encourage him to repent, confess and be reconciled with his brother. “It may be easier for two or three persons to succeed in this task than

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, Vol. xvi, p. 355.

for one.”¹⁸ It is one thing for the offender to disagree with one, but when two others concur in the matter against him, it is unreasonable and arrogant not to submit and repent under such circumstances. Having mature believers as witnesses should impress the offender with the serious nature of his situation. Furthermore, it should be clearly explained that in accordance with Christ’s command the second step in the process of church discipline is in progress. Most Christians will not want the matter to become public and therefore should be more willing to receive admonitions.

Increases the Seriousness of the Situation

The seriousness of this second step should also make the accuser reflect on the nature of his charges. “Is my case really so serious that I can get one or two other persons of sound judgment to go with me; or am I, perhaps, making a mountain out of a mole-hill?”¹⁹ Was it really sin that occurred? Could I be mistaken? Was God’s law actually violated or am I upset because my feelings were hurt? Was it just a misunderstanding or personality difference? Perhaps I should just drop the issue altogether, etc.? Sometimes witnesses are brought in and discover that the accuser’s charges are frivolous. The great wisdom of this second step is that most cases that are frivolous, wrong, based on legalism and so forth, are dealt with before the church court (the session) has to get involved and before the issue becomes public. Once again not only are reputations preserved, but also the peace of the church is preserved. The serious nature of this second step requires that the witnesses chosen are mature, objective, and knowledgeable in the Scriptures. A witness who does not know God’s word and who is not objective is of little use.

Provides Evidence to the Church Court

The witnesses not only increase the serious nature of the situation and increase persuasive power but also, if necessary, provide evidence against the accused before the church during the third step. These witnesses provide the session with reliable eyewitness testimony to the refusal to repent and reconcile. There is great wisdom in this three stage process. Not only is love, mercy and patience exhibited toward the offender by giving three distinct opportunities to repent and reconcile, but only serious cases reach the session level. And, when they do reach the session, abundant evidence should already be at hand. Thus the session’s work load is kept reasonable and when cases do arrive, there is already a history and evidence to work with.

Step Number Three

¹⁸ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1973), p. 700.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 699.

If the second step is unsuccessful, then Christ says, tell it to the church. “If he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church” (vs. 17). What does Christ mean when He says church? Christ means that the offender and the witnesses must appear before the elders of the local church. This was the practice of the Jewish synagogues when Christ spoke these words and it was the practice also of the Apostolic Church. Paul instructs Titus to “Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned” (3:10-11). Christ has appointed some to be governors or rulers over congregations and over all particular persons within the local assembly. These men have the responsibility to address the complaints of the offended, and to remove scandals. They have the authority from Christ to call before them, to examine, and even discipline if necessary the offender.²⁰ Noted 19th Century expert on church government Samuel Miller says: “There is only one passage more which will be adduced in support of the class of Elders before us. This is found in Matthew xviii. 15, 16, 17. Here it is believed that the 17th verse, which enjoins—Tell it to the Church—has evidently a reference to the plan of discipline known to have been pursued in the Jewish Synagogue; and that the meaning is, ‘Tell it to that Consistory or Judicatory,’ which is the Church acting by its representatives.... We must always interpret language agreeably to the well-known understanding and habit of the time and the country in which it is delivered. Now, it is perfectly certain that the phrase—‘Tell it to the Church’—was constantly in use among the Jews to express the carrying a complaint to the Eldership or representatives of the Church. And it is quite as certain, that actual cases occur in the Old Testament in which the term Church (*ekklesia*) is applied to the body of Elders. See as an example of this Deuteronomy xxxi. 28, 30....”²¹

There are a number of things to note regarding this third step.

First, Christ’s command clearly presupposed that all professing Christians are to be members of a local church and under the authority of the elders in that church. Church officers do not have the authority to summon anyone before the court except those under their care and authority. If someone is not a member of a church and not under authority, excommunication is meaningless. Why would anyone be concerned about being cast out of a church of which he is already not a part? The author of Hebrews also assumes that every believer is under the authority of particular church governors; Hebrews 13:17: “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.”

Second, this third step involves more solemnity, persuasion and authority than the second step. The persons involved, the witnesses, and all the evidence are brought before the church court for examination. The elders of the church should be very knowledgeable in Scripture and theology. They should be gifted in wisdom and they should have a genuine concern for all involved. As church governors these men act (in the Lord) with the full authority of Jesus Christ. Thus, to ignore the admonitions of the elders and the accumulated wisdom and knowledge of the

²⁰ David Dickson, *A Brief Exposition of the Evangel of Jesus Christ According to Matthew* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1981 [1647]), p. 248.

²¹ Samuel Miller, *An Essay on the Warrant, Nature and Duties of the Office of Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church*, (Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage, 1987 [1832]), pp. 65-66.

session shows a spirit of rebellion, arrogance and obstinacy. If the offender is found guilty by the church court and then disobeys the court's instruction to repent and reconcile, then that person is guilty not only of the original offense, but is also guilty of refusing to submit to the decision of the court.

Third, given the fact that the elders are well trained in Scripture and theology and have great wisdom and experience, this third stage should discover and remedy complaints that are frivolous and groundless. Although the second stage should filter out many cases that do not merit discipline, some groundless cases do make it to the session level. When the church court finds that a complaint is frivolous, then they have a responsibility to rebuke the complainant. If the complainant's charges are wrong and have been spread throughout the church, he must be rebuked by all.

Fourth, the third step which sets the case before the church court is the final step before excommunication. "If the offender disobey[s] the Church's direction for removing of the scandal, then the church may and should excommunicate the obstinate; that is, declare him to be deprived of the honour of a Christian, till he repent, and to be holden in such disrespect as the heathen and publicans were by the Jewish Church in those days."²² "Because of his own stubbornness he has lost his right to church membership, and it has now become the church's painful duty to make this declaration—in order that even this severe measure of exclusion may, with God's blessing, result in the man's conversion (I Cor. 5:5; II Thes. 3:14, 15)."²³

Excommunication serves three basic functions. It (as noted) serves as a radical means to drive the unrepentant sinner to repentance. It serves as a means to purify the church, to sanctify it and preserve it from evil and heresy. It also serves as a public warning to others, to instill diligence to the means of grace and the fear of God. Two of these features are explicitly set forth by Paul in his instructions to the church at Corinth: "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us" (1 Corinthians 5:4-7). The third is set forth in 1 Timothy 5:20: "Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear." Excommunication is thus to be conducted in the presence of the whole congregation.

After Christ describes the three-step process and finishes describing the excommunication of the person who refuses to heed the church, He then tells us the serious nature of church discipline that God will certainly back the decision of the session or the church court. "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For

²² David Dickson, *A Brief Exposition of the Evangel of Jesus Christ According to Matthew*, p. 249.

²³ William Hendrickson, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew*, p. 701.

where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:18-20).

Verses 18 through 20 are not a digression from Christ’s teaching on church discipline or the importance of group prayer but rather tell us that when elders act in matters of church discipline according to God’s word, it is ratified by Christ in heaven. Excommunication is not a light thing at all. In our day, people view church discipline as seriously as being asked to leave the Lion’s Club. But when the session acts, Christ is present. When the court asks, the Father responds. Christians should shudder at the thought of excommunication, for it is Christ Himself who excommunicates: “In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ...with the power of the Lord Jesus Christ deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh (1 Cor 5:4).” It is the elders who make the decision in accordance with Scripture. It is the elders who pronounce the sentence, but it is Jesus Christ who has the power and the authority to cast men into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Conclusion

The commands of Christ in Matthew 18:15ff are very simple yet exceedingly wise and practical. We hear much in our day about the unity of the body, and the love of the saints, but it seems that most modern churchmen ask us to do the very opposite of Christ’s words. They ask us to ignore false doctrine and to sweep sin under the rug. But such advice does not really lead to the purity and the peace of Christ’s church. Rather, it is leading the better Reformed churches down the broad path toward the incompetence,²⁴ heresy and gimmickry of modern neo-evangelicalism.

The church should be a place of justice and biblical due-process. Christians need to learn to confront each other about their sins privately, rather than gossiping and tale-bearing around the church. Church courts need to make sure that Christ’s words are strictly followed by church members and by the courts.²⁵ Let us show the world our love for Christ by our love and concern for our brothers—even the little ones of the kingdom. “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates

²⁴ Incompetent: “without adequate ability, knowledge, fitness... *Incompetent* denotes a lack of the requisite qualifications for performing a given act” (*Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary Unabridged* [Collins World, 1975], p. 924).

²⁵ Things have gotten so bad in many churches when it comes to the administration of justice that often pagan civil courts do a better job than church courts. One problem is that the biblical qualifications for ruling elder have been ignored for generations in many denominations. Ruling elders need to have a solid understanding of the Bible, God’s law and theology. If an elder does not understand the biblical definition of love, justice, evidence, etc., then he is susceptible to notions from pagan psychology and subjectivism. Church officers are *not* supposed to follow their feelings and own personal opinions but the teaching of God’s word *alone*. When the apostle Paul rebuked the Corinthian believers for taking their conflicts before a pagan civil court, he assumed that Christian judgment should be far superior to the pagan’s ability to judge. “Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life? If then you have judgments concerning things pertaining to this life, do you appoint those who are least esteemed by the church to judge? I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren?” (1 Corinthians 6:1-5)

his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also (1 John 4:20-21).”

Appendix

Common Excuses for Violation Matthew 18:15-16—Refuted

1. I do not have the time to go to my brother. Although it is certainly preferable to go and speak to a brother face to face, there are circumstances that may arise that would justify the use of a telephone to speak to your brother. The fact that we have telephones in our modern culture effectively eliminates this as a reasonable excuse. If a Christian realizes that a brother has sinned against him just after leaving on a two-year business transfer to Tahiti, he can still pick up the phone and effectively communicate with his brother. Furthermore, if you believe the sin is so serious it must be confronted then you are biblically obligated to make time. If you are not willing to set aside the time necessary to go to your brother then you must forgive your brother and never bring it up again to yourself or anyone else. If you refuse to set aside the time to confront your brother, then you had better not set aside time to gossip and badmouth your brother to others.

2. If I confront my brother about his sin, is this not judging my brother? Doesn't the Bible say "Judge not, that you be not judged" (Matt 7:1)? This passage is often quoted out of context and used as an excuse for laxity in church discipline. But the Bible clearly teaches that Christians can and should form opinions of others (cf. 1 Cor. 5:12; 6:1-5; Gal. 1:8,9; Phil. 3:2; 1 Thess. 2:14-15; 1 Tim. 1:6,7; Ti. 3:2,10; 1 John 4:1; 2 John 10; 3 John 9, etc.). Jesus Himself in verse 6 refers to evil people as dogs and swine! The same Jesus who said judge not, also said, "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment" (John 7:24). If one examines the context, Jesus is condemning the hypocritical, harsh, and unmerciful judgment meted out on people that was a common practice among the Pharisees. Hendrickson writes: "The Lord is here condemning the spirit of censoriousness, judging harshly, self-righteously, without mercy, without love, as also the parallel passage (Luke 6:36,37) clearly indicates. To be discriminating and critical is necessary; to be hypercritical is wrong. One should avoid saying what is untrue (Ex. 23:1), unnecessary (Prov. 11:13), and unkind (Prov. 18:8)... This inclination to discover and severely condemn the faults, real or imaginary, of others, while passing lightly over one's own frequently even more lamentable violations of God's holy law, was common among the Jews.... The habitual self-righteous fault finder must remember that he himself can expect to be condemned, and this not only by men, but also and especially by God, as vs. 6:14, 15 has already indicated. Cf. 18:23-25."²⁶ Jesus hates judgment according to a false standard of righteousness, hypocritical judgment and an unkind, unmerciful, judgmental spirit. The idea common in our day

²⁶ William Hendriksen, *New Testament and Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1973), pp. 356-357.

that people are to judge no one is absurd. If applied consistently, this would lead to chaos in society; for if no one can judge then family discipline, church discipline and civil courts would all cease, and all prisons would be emptied.

3. Isn't confronting my brother about his sin unloving? Unfortunately, many in the modern church have adopted a pagan false definition of love. Love is defined primarily in a feel- good, emotionally based manner. Love is seen as letting bygones be bygones, as sweeping sin and false doctrine under the rug. Love is viewed as the opposite of confrontation. The Bible, however, defines love primarily as the fulfilling of God's law; as obedience toward Jesus Christ. "Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10). "To love one's neighbor means to keep the law in relation to him, working him no ill, in word, thought, or deed. If a neighbor's course of action leads to evil, or to problems, a word of warning is to be given as a means of preventing him ill."²⁷ Since Jesus Christ commands us to go to our brother when he sins against us, then, if we do not go, we are not loving our brother. The context is going after the one lost sheep; one goes after the lost sheep to save it and not to harm it. Is telling the person who has cancer which needs to be removed, that everything is fine the loving thing to do? Of course not! Love means confronting sin and heresy head on. (Sin, of course, is confronted in a humble, loving way). "In essence, it is desirous to obey God in order to please Him and to do whatever He says is best for others."²⁸

4. I do not want to go to my brother because I hate conflict. This is probably the most common reason why people do not go to their brother. Confronting a brother about his sin face to face is difficult for many believers. Sometimes when Christians do get the nerve to go to their brother in private, they clam up and become very uncomfortable. Often, there is a fear of offending a brother, or of losing a friend, or even making an enemy that stops us from taking biblical action. This hatred of conflict and fear of approaching a brother must be overcome for several reasons. First, (as already noted) Christ's words are a command. Therefore, disregarding what He says is not an option for Christians. Second, ignoring sin because one hates conflict does not eliminate conflict, it only postpones it. Sin and heresy will act as a cancer upon the body of Christ if not dealt with and removed. Dealing with sin immediately actually involves less conflict, for sin is dealt with before it spreads and causes more damage. Paul said, "Do you not know a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven..." (1 Cor. 5:6-7). Sin and heresy must be nipped in the bud before it leads to a spiritual crisis in the church. Third, obeying Christ's command to go to your brother eliminates the sinful tendency of people to gossip and damage a brother's reputation. It is very common for people who disobey Christ's command, to tell all their friends about the offense. Because of our sinful natures, we would rather gossip and damage our brother's reputation than confront him in private. Although people may fear confronting a brother, they often do not fear telling all their friends and thus offend Jesus Christ.

²⁷ R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 285.

²⁸ Jay E. Adams, *More Than Redemption*, 1973), p. 254.

Our love toward Jesus Christ and our erring brother must take precedence over our hatred of conflict.

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