

Matthew 18 and Christian Conduct

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Matthew 18:15-17 is the locus classicus for handling conflicts among Christians. It is however, commonly honoured in the breach. And its application is woefully narrowed. In this brief study, we shall attempt to clarify the meaning and the ambit of Jesus' teaching on the responsibility of Christians in conflict situations.

The Thrust of the Passage

The purpose of Matthew 18:15-17 is surely to resolve in the most efficient and God-honouring manner disputes and conflicts among Christian believers. This is achieved by moving, in ever-widening circles, from the immediate source of the difficulty to resolutions involving increasingly higher-level decision making. Conflicts are ideally resolved on the lowest plane possible, thereby creating minimal embarrassment and publicity both for the creator of the conflict and for the larger community. The one at fault is ideally brought to a proper admission of his error and to a correction of it before it can create problems for third parties. Our Lord's concern is both to bring the wrongdoer to right action and to maintain peace and harmony among the Christians with whom he or she is associated.

How Widely Does the Passage Apply?

Most commentators see the passage as speaking narrowly to church contexts. For them, the passage applies to instances in which one church member offends another. The object of the offense must then try to resolve the matter with the subject of the offense; if this does not happen owing to the intransigence of the sinner, the charge is made and repentance sought in the presence of two or three witnesses; and if this fails, the case is taken to the church as a whole. Only when the one at fault refuses to accept the judgment of the church is he removed from its membership.

That process is patently clear from the text. There is only one remaining question—and it is of vital importance: Is this revelatory procedure limited to

ecclesiastical contexts, or is it mandated beyond those confines?

It is surely the case that the passage speaks of Christian “brethren” and does not have unbelievers in focus. To be sure, pagans as well as Christians would much benefit from applying the approach set out in the text, and it may well be that Jesus’ teaching has been an influence on the development of appeals procedures in the Civil and Common Law traditions. One thinks of the common procedural requirement in international tribunals such as the European Court of Human Rights that one must first “exhaust domestic remedies” before seeking the jurisdiction of the international court.

In any event, it should not be difficult to see that the Matthaean passage creates a mandatory approach to conflicts between Christian believers—whether within or without the church proper. After all, the New Testament term “church” refers not primarily to an earthy institution or to a denomination, but to the body of believers in general. Therefore, *in any instance of conflict between Christians, the Matthew 18 procedure must be applied. Anything else goes directly against Jesus’ own teaching.*

Applications

Here are a few concrete problem situations.

- A Christian wife is disturbed by her husband’s purchases made without consulting her. She tells her best friend about her concerns, seeking advice.
- A Christian working in a bank is bothered by a fellow employee’s loud and raucous story telling within the hearing of customers. He goes to the bank supervisor with his complaint.
- A Christian professor is deeply hurt by the criticisms of his scholarship by a fellow academic at the Christian university where she teaches. She makes a formal complaint to the Dean.
- A student cannot stand the mess created and maintained by his roommate at their Christian college. He goes to the dormitory supervisor, asking that the latter instruct the roommate to clean up the room they occupy.
- Another student, convinced that he has been forced to do too much irrelevant reading in a course, trashes the professor on the required student course evaluation which goes automatically to the Provost’s office.
- A journalist is told by a fellow Christian journalist on the same paper that her latest article is “cheap and unprofessional.” She goes to the managing editor and insists that her critic be informed of the true value of her work.
- A professor at a Christian seminary/university, having been criticized by his students for low grading, is suddenly offered by the administration a non-negotiable reduction in teaching load and a contract at half-salary—without any opportunity to justify the continuation of her regular salary or teaching

responsibilities, or a revision of her grading policies.

In all of these instances, the Christian individual, group, or institution suffering offense appears to have a legitimate complaint. *But in every one of the cases, there has been an egregious violation of our Lord's teaching in Matthew 18.*

Why? Because the Christian did not *first* go to the party creating the offense and endeavor to resolve the matter at that level. In each instance, the matter was taken to third parties or higher levels without any attempt to get the offending party to see the error of his or her ways, admit the offense, and make an effort to rectify it.

Suppose that there is some question as to whether the other party is indeed a believer, what then? Surely, the benefit of doubt should be given to that person and the person should be treated as if he or she is a Christian.^[2] And even if the offending person is not a believer, would not treating that individual as one would a fellow Christian provide a far more effective witness than embarrassing the person with third parties or higher-level authorities before trying to resolve the issue on a one-to-one basis, or, failing that, in the presence of one or two others?

Conflict is inevitable in a sinful, broken world. But it is sad to see how often Christians themselves exacerbate conflicts by ignoring our Lord's clear teaching.

When Does Matthew 18 Not Apply?

The short answer: when *publication* occurs. Consider the following two scenarios.

First, the Christian is publicly defamed—slandered (oral defamation) or libeled (defamed in a more permanent form—in print, by graffiti, through an e-mail or webcast). Must he or she first go to the defamer before making any public response? Of course not, since the effects of the defamation are already occurring and the longer one waits to refute the false claims, the worse the consequences. Thus, it is entirely right to file an immediate legal action against the defamer, publish a refutation, etc. The same is of course true when the object of the defamation is a third party. These situations are analogous to *self-defense* and *defense of others* in the sphere of the criminal law.

Second, suppose that publication of false doctrine or misleading theological opinions takes place. Is it necessary first to go to the author to clear up the matter, and only if that does not succeed respond publicly to the error? Certainly not, and for the very same reason as in the case of defamation. Once publication occurs, the error will inevitably influence others. The false teaching must therefore be dealt with as quickly as possible for the sake of the health of the church in general and that of individual believers in particular. Here again, we have an analogy

with the legal “defense of others”—a concern for the well-being of the church at large that transcends any surprise or embarrassment to the original author of the heretical or dangerous theological idea.

A recent example may be useful. A theologian presented a paper at a theological conference without any disclaimer as to its publication. It was published on the net without his approval. The paper contained exceedingly dangerous exegetical notions—capable of eliminating any solid basis for scriptural authority and substituting an ecclesiastical work of the Holy Spirit for an objective biblical standard of theological truth. Refutations were almost immediately published.

The response of the author of the errors was to criticize the critics for not coming personally to him before publishing their refutations. The president of seminary where the author is a faculty member and the head of the author’s department opined that the author’s critics, in violation of Matthew 18, had sinned by not coming to him first with their objections. Ironically, those seminary officials never saw a problem with the content of their professor’s paper; indeed, they defended his “scholarship.”

In this instance, there was no violation whatsoever of Matthew 18. The author could have stated on his paper that it was “not for publication or distribution”; he did not. But even if he had so indicated and publication had nevertheless occurred, the fact of publication *alone* would have justified public refutation. The longer false ideas circulate, the more the church is harmed. A proper analogy is with cancer surgery: however the disease originates, the quicker the cancerous material is cut out the less likely the patient will die. Granted, publication should not have occurred, but the fault lies either with the author who does not restrict the use of his material or with whoever illegitimately distributes it.

Once the harm is done, it must be countered. A teacher must be scrupulous in his or her teaching and writing—owing to the effects of heretical and false ideas on the students, hearers, and readers. Scripture states unequivocally: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brethren, knowing that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness” (James 3:1). The author’s seminary, rather than condemning his critics as “sinners,” should have seen the beam in their own eye and dealt with the perilous views of their faculty colleague.

[\[1\]](#) The Greek text of the passage has no variants influencing its teaching; see, for example, the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece*.

[\[2\]](#) The great commentator Lenski remarks: “Until the clear denial of brotherhood is established, I must treat the offender as a brother in Christ and in no other way,” Gerhard Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964), p. 698.