

# Conflict Resolution in the Local Church

Text: Matthew 18:15-17

Introduction:

1. Offenses will come in the Christian life! Christians are imperfect and will sometimes be wronged by another brother or sister in Christ. The need WILL arise at some point in your life when you will need to apply Scriptural principles to seek to resolve a conflict with another believer.
2. Matthew 18:15-17 is a foundational passage that gives us God's Divine pattern/mechanism for resolving conflicts in the local church.
3. We will consider this passage under two simple headings:
  - The Situation requiring Matthew 18.
  - The Sequence of Matthew 18.

## I. THE SITUATION REQUIRING MATTHEW 18 (Vs. 15A)

It appears to me that there are two extremes when it comes to this passage. On the one hand, it is often neglected by believers when it should be applied. On the other hand, sometimes attempts are made to try and make certain issues a Matthew 18 matter when it is not. This is particularly the case in relation to step 1 of Matthew 18. A right application of Matthew 18 is vital. Consider...

### A. Where Matthew 18 does NOT apply.

1. Reproving Error. False doctrine must be dealt with in a plain and public fashion. For example:
  - a. The Lord Jesus Christ publicly and plainly denounced the errors of the religious leaders.
  - b. The Apostle Paul names false teachers boldly and publicly (1 Tim. 1:20) and commanded under inspiration that false teachers be marked out and avoided (Rom. 16:17).
  - c. The Apostle Paul publicly reprovved Peter for his error with those of the circumcision (Gal 2:11-14). This was a public church matter. Peter had not sinned against Paul on an individual level. He had sinned against the church in his actions with the Judaizers.
2. Accusing an Elder (1 Tim. 5:19-20)
  - a. A pastor should be approachable on many matters including offenses of a minor nature that may need to be resolved. He is after all the Lord's under shepherd and should be willing to be approached by the Lord's sheep. He is also Himself a member of the flock and a fellow brother in Christ. For example:

- i. The pastor's preaching. Every Christian is to "prove all thing" and seek to apply the Berean principle. A believer should be able to approach the pastor with a question or comment on what he is preaching. On the pastor's end, he should be willing to allow that to take place. On the church member's end, a respectful tone should characterize the approach. A Christian should not be discourteous and rude to the pastor or any other believer for that matter!
- ii. Offenses and misunderstandings of a minor nature. For example, a misunderstanding over what the pastor said to you about an issue.
- b. However, accusations of a more serious nature that if proven would potentially disqualify the man of God from holding office, must be handled in the presence of witnesses. If the accusations have to do with the discharge of the pastoral office, then 1 Timothy 5:19 applies.
- c. Note: The Pastor should be given some leeway to request witnesses if he feels the situation is such that their presence would be beneficial.

**B. Where Matthew 18 DOES apply.**

1. The issue is between 2 individuals in the church and therefore falls under the category of a personal issue/conflict.
2. The issue involves one brother wronging another brother in some way. The word 'trespass' is most frequently translated 'sin' in the New Testament (38 times). It means to err, miss the mark. The translators chose translate the word 'trespass' in this context. The word literally means "to pass over a boundary line; to commit an offense or to do any act that injures or annoys another; to violate any rule of rectitude to the injury of another." (Webster 1828)
3. Remember! Christian love can cover many offenses, thus avoiding the need for a confrontation.
  - a. Prov. 17:9 "He that covereth a transgression seeketh love; but he that repeateth a matter separateth *very* friends."
  - b. 1 Pet. 4:8 "And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins." The word 'fervent' means "stretched out; without ceasing". The same word is translated "without ceasing" in Acts 12:5 where prayer was made for Peter "without ceasing". The English word 'fervent' captures the spirit beautifully. The word means "Ardent; very warm, earnest; excited; animated; glowing; as fervent zeal; fervent piety." (Webster 1828)
4. That said, there will be some issues that can only be properly resolved by the two parties getting together and sorting things out. If

the issue is such that you can't deal with it personally between you and the Lord then approach the brother or sister concerned and seek to resolve the issue.

5. Remember, there is also the aspect that it might be in the other party's best interest for you to bring their fault to their attention so that they might grow in their Christian walk.
6. Remember that if you are the one who has wronged another, you can also take the initiative in the situation too before the offended brother approaches you. Matthew 5:23-24 **"Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."** Some points to remember with this verse:
  - a. This is a very personal matter between the individual and the Lord. The verse is not a whip for you to carnally lash others with. E.G., "I have ought against you so it's YOUR responsibility to come and reconcile with me!!!"
  - b. It is vital to keep a sensitive and open heart to the promptings of the Spirit of God in this matter. The Lord has a way of bringing such issues to our hearts and minds when we are spending time in His presence if we have spiritual ears to listen.
  - c. If in doubt, go the extra mile and make sure there is no offense!
  - d. Personal Illustration: The time the Lord convicted me to apologize to an older man for the way I had spoken to him about an issue (Bathurst).

## **II. THE SEQUENCE OF MATTHEW 18 (VS. 15B-17)**

There are three steps to follow in the attempt to resolve an issue. Each step after step 1 is an escalation of the issue and involves more people. Let's consider the three steps:

### **A. Discuss the Issue in Private (Vs. 15)**

For this to take place there needs to be:

#### **1. The Right Meeting (Vs. 15a)**

In this meeting there needs to be:

##### **a. Candidness – "tell him his fault"**

- i. The phrase "tell (a) fault" comes from the Greek word also translated 'reprove', 'rebuke', 'convince' in the New Testament. Humility and grace is much needed by both parties to have an honest discussion over a fault, particularly by the one receiving the reproof. The flesh hates to be corrected and if the grace of God is not drawn upon, such a meeting can turn sour very quickly.

- ii. Jesus said, “Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, **rebuke him**; and if he repent, **forgive him.**” (Luke 17:3)
  - iii. What clothes should you wear to such a meeting? Wear humble clothes! 1 Peter 5:5 “Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all *of you* be subject one to another, and be **clothed with humility**: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.”
  - b. Confidentiality – “between thee and him alone”
    - i. Note the wisdom of God in this. The aim is for the two individuals involved to sort things out in a Christ honouring manner and to avoid the matter spreading out to others in the church and causing damage.
    - ii. Sadly, this step is so often neglected by believers and they speak to just about everyone except the individual involved.
    - iii. Note: I believe that there is a place in certain situations for one to seek godly council from an appropriate authority before taking this step (Prov. 11:14; 15:22; 24:6). For example, it would be natural and appropriate for a wife to seek her husband’s council before approaching a man in the church. It would be wise for a husband to consult with his wife before approaching a sister in the church. It is appropriate for a church member to seek help from a pastor or deacon in a conflict. The pastor is God’s ordained authority in the local church. The deacon, while not holding a ruling role, does have a peace-making role in the local church as seen in Acts 6.
    - iv. Someone wisely stated that gossip is talking to someone about an issue who is not part of the problem or a part of the solution.
  - c. Closure – “if **he shall hear thee**, thou hast gained thy brother”.
    - i. If the matter is resolved, then forgiveness should be extended and the parties should move on. Heed the command of Scriptures like Col. 3:13 “Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a **quarrel** against any: **even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.**”
    - ii. Remember that in human conflicts there is often some fault on both sides so be prepared to hear the other brother as well and show grace and humility on your end if there is something you may need to put right also.
2. The Right Motive (Vs. 15b)

- a. The motive and intent on the part of the one making the approach should be to “gain” the brother who has committed the offense.
- b. This calls for careful heart searching before the Lord as to one’s motive before arranging such a meeting. It may require a season of prayer and waiting on the Lord depending on the situation. We must be prepared to ask ourselves the hard questions. Is my motive coming from a genuine desire for godly reconciliation with the brother for the glory of God and the furtherance of the Gospel? Or am I being motivated by fleshly desires to get even or have a carnal, angry vent.
- c. If the motive is a spiritual one, then that will be evident in the tone of the one who approaches you to resolve a difficulty.

**B. Discuss the Issue with Partners (Vs. 16)**

- 1. The people to have as partners in reconciliation (Vs. 16a)
  - a. If step one fails, then the help of one or two others may be sought in the reconciliation process.
  - b. Take care who you involve in such a process! While it is not stated specifically, we can safely assume based on other Scriptural principles that it would be advisable to involve people who have a measure of Christian maturity and wisdom. Church leadership a good place to start or another mature brother or sister in the church.
- 2. The point of having partners in reconciliation (Vs. 16b)
  - a. The verse says that the purpose of the witnesses is “that every word may be established.” The word ‘established’ means “to cause or make to stand”. It means to “make firm, fix, establish.”
  - b. This quotation is drawn from the Old Testament law. Deut. 19:15 “One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: **at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established.**”
  - c. Again, the wisdom of God is highlighted in this instruction. When two of the brethren find themselves at an impasse, unable to reconcile over an issue, the heat and emotion tends to cloud their objectivity. It is very easy for a “he said, she said” situation to emerge. We are all naturally biased to remember a conversation in such a way as to cast ourselves in the best light. When things are emotionally charged, it is also easy to mishear and misinterpret what the other brother or sister has said. One or two objective witnesses can assist to establish the facts of the situation and hopefully guide the parties to an amicable solution.

- d. Note: For serious church matters, minute taking can be a wise practice and help to “establish” the facts of what were discussed.

**C. Discuss the Issue in Public (Vs. 17)**

If the first two steps fail to result in a resolution, then the third and final step is to involve the church body as a whole.

1. The Appeal of the Church (Vs. 17a)
  - a. Observe that this step does not move to discipline straight away. There is first a final appeal by the church to the erring brother to repent of his ways – “if he neglect **to hear the church**”. Wiersbe writes, “Remember, our goal is not the winning of a case but the winning of a brother. The word ‘gained’ in verse 15 is used in 1 Corinthians 9:19-22 to refer to winning the lost; but it is also important to win the saved.”
  - b. All the way through this process, the aim is reconciliation and discipline is the final resort if the brother concerned remains obstinate and unrepentant.
2. The Action by the Church (Vs. 17b)
  - a. If the brother will not hear the church, then he is to be disciplined. Failing to cooperate with a biblical method of reconciliation is a serious matter which can result in church discipline.
  - b. There is to be a withdrawal of fellowship from the unrepentant brother. Again, this ultimately is in the hopes that such a separation will cause him to consider the error of his ways and come to repentance.
  - c. Treating the erring brother as “an heathen man and a publican” does not mean we treat them in a calloused and unloving way. 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 expresses the truth well, “And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet **count *him* not as an enemy, but admonish *him* as a brother.**”

**Conclusion:** Do you have an unresolved offense in your life towards a brother or sister in the local church? Resolve before the Lord to do your best to follow Biblical principles and seek reconciliation.