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Reconciliation and Matthew 18

Study Paper

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Reconciliation is one of the principal messages of the Bible. Genesis begins with God, Adam and Eve walking and talking together harmoniously, but that brief relationship was ruptured by sin. Since Adam and Eve, mankind has lived estranged from God because of sin. Genesis also describes the breakdown of relationship between humans, as Cain murdered Abel and the earth became filled with violence (Genesis 6:11-13).

The Old Testament often shows God's willingness to relate to Israel, although they were not willing to obey Him. The New Testament declares His great work to reconcile mankind to Himself through the death of Jesus Christ (Romans 5:8-10).

Reconciliation Between God and Man

In Romans 5 Paul speaks of reconciliation as an action (verb) and an outcome (noun). "For if when we were enemies we were reconciled¹ to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation"² (Romans 5:10–11).

It is important to consider that reconciliation was a *work* accomplished by God the Father and Jesus Christ. From the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8), They determined that the Word would come to the earth and live as a man and become the complete sacrifice for sin. To accomplish His mission, Jesus never sinned. Furthermore, He finished all the work the Father delegated to Him, and He defeated Satan. The Father shared in this work of reconciliation by giving His Son for this process. This is an overview of the work of reconciliation that God and Christ did for us.

The Bible states that Christ was perfected through His sufferings (Hebrews 5:8–9). An aspect of His suffering was to do the work of reconciliation even though He died without seeing a single living person reconciled to God through His sacrificial work. It was *after* His resurrection that He saw individuals repent, accept His sacrifice, receive the Holy Spirit and begin a relationship with God the Father. Only then could He live His life in those reconciled to God (Galatians 2:20). Only then could the Father begin His *transforming* work in them (Philippians 1:6). Likewise, Christians must engage in the work of reconciliation regardless of the observable outcome.

¹ Thayer's *Greek-English Lexicon* #2644: "Verb *katallasso* from 2596 and 236; 1) to change, exchange, as coins for others of equivalent value 1a) to reconcile (those who are at variance) 1b) return to favour with, be reconciled to one 1c) to receive one into favour."

Strong's #2644: "*katallasso*...from 2596 and 236; to change mutually, i.e. (fig.) to compound a difference:—reconcile."

² Thayer's *Greek-English Lexicon* #2643: "*katallage* from 2644; 1) exchange 1a) of the business of money changers, exchanging equivalent values 2) adjustment of a difference, reconciliation, restoration to favour 2a) in the NT of the restoration of the favour of God to sinners that repent and put their trust in the expiatory death of Christ."

Strong's #2643: "*katallage*...from #2644; exchange (fig., adjustment), i.e. restoration to (the divine) favor:—atonement, reconciliation(-ing)."

The King James Version translates this as "atonement."

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Human Reconciliation

Christianity is the ongoing process of becoming like God, emulating Jesus Christ in our everyday lives as we await His return. When conflict with our fellowman creates a breach in our human relationships, it can also cause a breach in our relationship with Christ. But we can turn to both broad examples and specific instruction given by Christ for resolving such conflict. This is reconciliation as described in the New Testament.

The biblical formula for achieving reconciliation is given to show us how to restore a peaceful relationship with another. But we must first understand that, as with all Christian endeavor, the foundation of any effort toward reconciliation is the spiritual attitude and approach we bring into the discussion.

Before studying the specific formula given us by Jesus for addressing unresolved offenses and transgressions, let us look at the overview of God's expectations of Christians in maintaining positive relationships within the Church. For only with this right foundation can we hope to succeed in reconciliation. God's law of love toward neighbor is this foundation, as revealed throughout Scripture.

Like God, we should not want anyone to perish (Matthew 18:14; 2 Peter 3:9). Rather, we desire all men to be saved. Often those who offend us don't even realize what they have done.

We, like Christ, should forgive others when they "do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). Understanding that God has daily transgressions heaped against Him, yet at the same time loves us and gave His only begotten Son to die for us (John 3:16), we must also love those who sin against us and be willing to forgive them 70 times seven (Matthew 18:22–35).

Since all of us sin and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23), we should first of all recognize our own shortcomings (Romans 2:1). Removing planks from our own eyes better enables us to detect slivers in our brother's eyes (Matthew 7:3). When we admit our sins and repent of them, we will have less difficulty forgiving others.

We should believe the best about others (1 Corinthians 13:7), and we should cover a multitude of sins (Proverbs 10:12; 17:9). We are to be easily entreated (James 3:17, King James Version). We do not break God's law when someone sins against us (Psalm 119:165).

Disagreements and offenses that are not easily resolved will come (Acts 15:39; Proverbs 18:19). Yet we are to be patient one with the other and bear one another's burdens (Colossians 3:12–14). We should forgive complaints against each other. Often disagreements are not sin. They are just mistakes or personality conflicts. We pray about these disagreements and forget them. Below are some scriptures in this regard.

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- “And whenever you stand praying, *if you have anything against anyone, forgive him*, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses” (Mark 11:25, emphasis added throughout).

- “But *love your enemies, do good*, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great” (Luke 6:35).

- “Beloved, *do not avenge yourselves*, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord... Do not be overcome by evil, but *overcome evil with good*” (Romans 12:19–21).

- “And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, *forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you*” (Ephesians 4:32).

- “*Love... takes no account of the evil done to it* [it pays no attention to a suffered wrong]” (1 Corinthians 13:5, Amplified Bible).

If the above principles govern our hearts and actions, we need have no hesitation to approach a brother to seek reconciliation as needed.

God’s patient work of reconciliation is a pattern for us in our relationships with one another. In Matthew 5, Jesus describes the conciliatory approach His disciples should practice in their dealings with one another. Specifically, His disciples are to be “poor in spirit” (humble) and “peacemakers.”

Later, He states an overall principle of humility and conciliation, “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” (Matthew 5:23–24). So, early in His ministry Jesus set the standard procedure for restoring trust, agreement and relationship. It is this principle that covers any breakdown in relationship, because the phrase “something against you” can be applied to a minor irritation as well as to a sin.

Jesus states, in essence, we are to so live that we can be in one another’s presence without something being “in the way.” Whether that something is minor or significant, if it troubles us, we need to address it and be able to go forward together in peace. Otherwise, the spiritual growth of one or more will be hindered.

John states, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates 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). It is not honest to profess a “love” for someone, if we are not willing to *make the effort* to restore our relationship with that person.

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As we study Matthew 18, we must see that this chapter contains specific instruction that follows the model of God's *work* of reconciliation and Jesus' requirement that His disciples strive for reconciliation with one another. Christ's instruction in Matthew 18:15–17 presents a step-by-step approach to dealing with conflict within His Church.

However, Christ “sets the stage” by stating in verses 1 through 5 that reconciliation begins with humility. It is essential that all parties concerned begin with this correct approach and attitude. Christ then speaks of the importance of not causing offense, though it is inevitable that offenses will come (verses 6–11). Inevitably, we will be offended from time to time—and, inevitably, we offend others from time to time.

Next, Christ speaks about the care and concern that we should have for one another. Our love for one another should be so great that we will make every effort to restore the “lost sheep” to the fold. God does not want to see anyone perish and neither should we (verses 12–14).

This background gives us the attitude needed in order to seek and obtain reconciliation. The responsibility of each Christian to initiate the process when needed is clearly stated.

So, let's look at Matthew 18:15–18: “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. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. 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.”

Matthew 18:15 must be understood in the context that Jesus wants His disciples to do an ongoing *work* of reconciliation on the human level. He wants us to be like Him.

The example Jesus gives us involves sin by at least one party. Yet sometimes offenses occur that involve no sin. That is, one person feels offended due to his perception of the situation, but there is no sin for the offending party to repent of. Sometimes, one is even asked to repent of something he (or she) has not done, and therefore he cannot repent. Reconciliation of all parties is still the desired goal, but the following process may not lead to complete understanding and reconciliation in these cases. The Church leadership (1 Corinthians 5:3–5) may be unable to render a godly judgment holding either party accountable, if no actual sin is involved. In such cases, all parties must be patient with one another and not sow discord in the Church (Colossians 3:12–14).

When a Brother Has Sinned Against You (Step 1)

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.” The phrase, “you have gained your

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brother” indicates that the primary reason for going to your brother is to “gain him.” It should be done “in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted” (Galatians 6:1). The result is reconciliation, which leads to peace and brotherhood. If the discussions are successful, the matter is resolved in the initial step. When sin is handled in a private manner without involving others, we avoid engendering gossip and division. Two parties have done the hard work of mutual submission, repentance, forgiveness and agreement for going forward. They have been perfected to a degree by the process.

Peter’s understanding that the disciples were to engage in the process of going to one’s brother is indicated by his follow-on question: “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” (Matthew 18:21). Jesus then uses the parable of the unforgiving servant to underscore the importance of forgiveness, which is part of the reconciliation process (Matthew 18:22–35).

If one party is truly guilty, then repentance is a necessary ingredient of both forgiveness and reconciliation. In fact, the goal of the accuser must become that of trying to restore his brother. Note the attitude of the apostle Paul toward one who had sinned and repented: “Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death” (2 Corinthians 7:9–10).

Going with Witnesses (Step 2)

The restoration of damaged relationships almost always takes time. Each of these steps should be carefully considered in light of the time needed for understanding and change to take place. This process will be most fruitful when not pursued in an emotional state. Often, it is necessary to calm down and wait for others to also calm down before proceeding with the steps to reconciliation. This time between steps should be used to examine the self and to pray about the desired restoration.

“If he will not hear, take with you one or two more” (verse 16). Why? “That ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’” Perhaps he (or she) did not hear because he was in denial of his offense. Perhaps the presentation of the grievance was faulty. Perhaps he is actually innocent of an offense. In any case, it now becomes critical that objective witnesses validate the process, but exposure to a wider audience is still kept to a minimum.

Two witnesses were used in a judicial context to establish the fact in a judgment. See Deuteronomy 19:15: “One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established.” Verses 16 through 19 reinforce that the witnesses had great responsibility to be fair and honest.

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[Note: Some will have concerns about potential legal issues when taking this step or the next—taking the matter to the ministry. We know that the Bible says “we ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). But in this case the laws, such as in the United States, provide protection for our religious practices as members of a church following the doctrines it teaches. We are also covered by a principle called “qualified privilege,” which in principle allows for this kind of exchange of otherwise private information when it is done in the appropriate, allowable circle to fulfill the doctrinal practice.]

Take It to the Church (Step 3)

“And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church” (verse 17). One or both parties should take the matter, along with the witnesses, to the Church leadership. It is hoped that the counsel and judgment of the ministry will lead to a resolution of the issue and a reconciliation of the disputants. This is an appeal for an objective, spiritually minded, authoritative judgment on how the conflict should be resolved (Matthew 16:18–19; 18:18; 1 Corinthians 1:11; Titus 1:5).

Furthermore, the ministry desires and promotes the reconciliation of all brethren. If not resolved, the conflict will spread to others and perhaps even become a “root of bitterness” by which “many become defiled” (Hebrews 12:15).

In addition, it is important to recognize that when a matter covered by this Matthew 18 formula is brought to the Church leadership, the ministry will ask the one bringing the complaint if he or she has gone to his or her brother first. If not, the minister will encourage the plaintiff to seek private reconciliation following Christ’s instruction. This is essential before the ministry gets involved in the matter.

There are some exceptions, however. For certain sins, like known or suspected sexual misconduct by an adult with a child, the ministry must be brought in immediately to protect children, parents and the Church.

There are other times when it is appropriate and necessary for a member or minister to take an offense or evidence of wrongdoing directly to the Church leaders. These would be occasions in which the offense is not directly personal but flows from a breach of duty or responsibility that affects a wider group. While it may be an offense to the individual who witnesses it, it is also a sin against the Church itself.

For example, the ministry and the Church’s administrative officers function within carefully prescribed parameters. Their duties and ethics are spelled out not only in the Bible, but in our various governing documents. These are further defined by codes of ethics and job descriptions. They will normally assume that these expectations are being met. When they are violated and someone finds out, that person should take the facts directly to Church officials before the problem can be spread.

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This does not exclude going to the offender in private to point out the problem. However, such a case does not require the same process as a personal offense against an individual. The teaching of heresy or insurrection, for example, is not something the member should be expected to resolve privately. It is already within the Church's prerogative to deal with such errant conduct.

In any case, these are exceptions, and the Matthew 18 formula applies in most cases. In some situations, an individual may not see the desired result of his reconciliation efforts in this life. He may not be able to restore trust and fellowship with another person if that individual is not equally committed to reconciliation. Jesus did the work of reconciling man with God, without immediately seeing the fruits of His suffering. We should draw from His example that we will be perfected in some degree by the genuine *efforts* we put into reconciliation, regardless of the outcome.

How the Church Deals with the Matter (Step 4)

“But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector” (verse 17, last part). The goal is still the same—reconciliation of all individuals. Jesus addresses only the scenario in which the party judged to be guilty does not repent and reconcile. It is understood that if he did, once again the other individual would have “gained [his] brother,” and the matter would be put to rest.

But if the two parties fail in their efforts, Christ is clearly saying that either or both parties may request a judgment by the Church leadership. He shows that the judgment may lead to a change in the guilty party's status in the Church. In fact, Christ requires that brethren treat a corrected but still unrepentant brother “like a heathen and a tax collector”—as if he is no longer part of the fellowship of the saints.

This principle is evident in many biblical examples of discipline within the Church for the purpose of maintaining unity and peace. If the guilty individual is not willing to accept righteous judgment, not willing to repent and reconcile, then, in some cases, this person cannot participate in the fellowship of the Church. Such behavior and attitude would be a negative influence on others and be of no profit to the person either. Here are some scriptural examples of such judgments by the Church leadership.

Romans 16:17: “Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.”

1 Corinthians 5:11–13: “But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore ‘put away from yourselves the evil person.’”

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2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14: “But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us... And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed.”

1 Timothy 1:19–20: “Having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck, of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.”

Further Explanation of the Meaning, “Tell it to the Church”

Matthew 18:17 reads, “Tell it to the church.” The word *church* referred to here is from the Greek word *ekklesia*.³

The context of this passage helps us understand. In the next verse (verse 18), Jesus said: “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.” Notice He told His disciples “you” do this—the binding and loosing of judgments—and not for “the congregation” to do this.

Matthew Poole’s Commentary explains: “By *the church* then must be meant those who had power to bind and loose. Now though at this time there was no particular church formed, yet there were some who had a power to bind and loose. Christ had given such a power to his apostles” (note on Matthew 18:18).

Jesus has built His Church, and at no time has the Church been without leadership. Paul and Barnabas ordained elders in every church (Acts 14:23). In the New Testament, there is no example where a judgment to “bind and loose” such decisions was given to a congregation. In his letter to Titus, Paul commanded him to “appoint elders in every city” (Titus 1:5). This has been an established practice in the Church ever since. Elders are the recognized leaders in the Church and are the ones determining who should be considered as a “heathen” and “tax collector” (Matthew 18:17). God exercises His authority through the elders by granting them the right to make judgments and apply the appropriate discipline. This is the way God preserves unity and peace in the Church when members will not accept nor apply the correction.

³ *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon* #1577: “*ekklesia*, from a compound of #1537 and a derivative of #2564...

1a) an assembly of the people convened at the public place of the council for the purpose of deliberating

1b) the assembly of the Israelites

1c) any gathering or throng of men assembled by chance, tumultuously

1d) in a Christian sense

1d1) an assembly of Christians gathered for worship in a religious meeting

1d2) a company of Christian, or of those who, hoping for eternal salvation through Jesus Christ, observe their own religious rites, hold their own religious meetings, and manage their own affairs, according to regulations prescribed for the body for order’s sake

1d3) those who anywhere, in a city, village, constitute such a company and are united into one body

1d4) the whole body of Christians scattered throughout the earth...”

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Let's look at additional reasons to conclude that the "church" in this passage cannot mean the whole congregation:

- God has given the responsibility for putting doctrine and judgment into the Church to apostles, leaders, ministers (Ephesians 2:20). The example in Acts 15 verses 6, 13 and 19 shows the apostles and elders taking the lead in discussions and decisions in the Jerusalem conference.

- Among the membership of God's Church, there are spiritual babes, totally unqualified to make spiritual judgments that are binding on the Church (1 Corinthians 3:1–3; Hebrews 5:12–14).

- God has appointed ministers to pastor, lead, teach, admonish and make judgments in the Church (Ephesians 4:11–16).

- Even in Old Testament Israel, leaders and rulers chosen to make judgments were "able men," not average Israelites (Exodus 18:21–22). Both Deuteronomy 17:8–11 and 19:16–17 show that the priests were to judge. They were to "pronounce upon you the sentence of judgment." It can be reasonably concluded that to "tell it to the church" means to bring it to the authorities in the Church, Christ's ministry.

We conclude that step 3, bringing the matter to the Church, must be conducted in a private manner. The ministry will sometimes seek further guidance from other elders or supervisors in making difficult judgments. The goal is godly judgment that will lead all parties to reconciliation and peace. Should members refuse to "hear the church," as evidenced by repentance and reconciliation, they must be removed from fellowship for their own good as well as for the good of the congregation. The door to future reconciliation after repentance must be held open by both the offended party and the ministry.

There may be circumstances in which the Church does not choose to render a decision or take disciplinary action. If there is no evidence that the offending party has sinned and refuses to repent, then the matter may be left to heal with spiritual growth over time. Even so, all parties are expected to go in peace and not sow discord among brethren. In any case, the ministry will counsel toward reconciliation and peace. This does not mean that the relationship will always be restored to close friendship and trust. Scripture shows that "a brother offended is harder to win than a strong city" (Proverbs 18:19).

If the offending party does repent of sin, or apologizes for offense even when no sin is evident, then the offended party is expected to forgive and be reconciled. If the offended one clings to his (or her) hurt and refuses to reconcile, he may become the one who must receive discipline from the Church, particularly if he gossips and sows discord.

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As in all cases of judgment and discipline in the United Church of God, there is an appeal process open to brethren and elders alike.

Summary

Since Jesus Christ made the supreme sacrifice in order for man to be reconciled with God, reconciliation is one of the principal messages of the Bible. Without it, there can be no relationship between God and man, and no possibility of man's salvation. Man's relationship with God is contingent on his relationship with his fellowman. When conflict creates a breach in human relationships, it is imperative that the parties involved take appropriate steps to heal that breach. In Matthew 18, Jesus instructs us in the steps necessary to effectively restore a peaceful relationship. They are:

Step 1) The offended party is to go to the offender in private and seek to resolve the difficulty and reconcile (verse 15). If both parties have godly attitudes and are able to understand the issue, they will be united as brothers. If the offender "will not hear," then:

Step 2) The offended party is required to take one or two witnesses to the attempted reconciliation (verse 16). If reconciliation is not forthcoming, then:

Step 3) One or both parties, along with the witnesses, take the matter to the leadership of the Church (verse 17).

Step 4) The leadership of the Church either renders a judgment (verse 17) or decides not to render a judgment.

When all parties adhere to these steps in the spirit of love, reconciliation should result. But if one refuses to reconcile, then the Church leadership, to ensure peace within the congregation, must follow Christ's instruction to apply the proper discipline. Even so, the goal would continue to be reconciliation and restoration.