

## A Response to the Question of Conflict Resolution and the Role of Third Parties An Examination of Matthew 18:15 – 17

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Within the real situations we face, some have argued that, when a Christian is in conflict with another Christian, any talking to a third party close to the other person constitutes a violation of Matthew 18:15, under the assumption that this passage is considering ‘interpersonal conflict.’ I have three major difficulties with this that I will address at this time: First, there is a very significant difference within manuscripts where this very passage is not actually referring to merely ‘interpersonal conflict.’ This has direct implications for who may be involved and how. Second, this view is based on a serious lack of engagement with the whole of the biblical story; it does not consider the whole biblical record on this issue. Third, the inconsistency with which this view gets applied, when it is attempted, should be an indication that the view itself is problematic.

*The Manuscript Question: Is that what Matthew 18:15 – 17 really says?*

Matthew 18:15 – 17 describes both a problem and the protocol for resolving that problem. On some occasions, the passage is taken to mean ‘how to handle interpersonal conflict in the church.’ Indeed, in some Bible translations, the problem is identified in 18:15 as, ‘When a brother sins *against you*.’ However, in most Bibles there is a footnote that says, ‘Some manuscripts do not have *against you*.’ Those manuscripts are in the minority but they are the earliest and most reliable. Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus do not contain the words ‘against you.’ The standard Greek text – the 21<sup>st</sup> edition of Eberhard Nestle’s *Novum Testamentum Graece* – does not have the words ‘against you.’ The early Christian scholar Jerome, arguably the greatest Hebrew scholar among Christians in the first three centuries and a very significant figure in the study of the New Testament, in his commentary on Matthew considers person-to-person conflict in his commentary on 18:15 – 17, but does not restrict his comments to that arena. He comments on the verse as referring to all types of sin. Luke 17:3, the parallel text to Matthew 18:15, says, ‘If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.’ From the outset, then, this teaching is not limited to matters of personal offense. Paul says the same thing in Galatians 6:1, ‘Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.’

The implications are important for our discussion: If this is the true rendering of Matthew 18:15, then both the type of problem and the protocol for resolving it broaden out into something larger than interpersonal conflict. The type of *problem* covered here broadens because it encompasses *any* situation of sin, including idolatry (a sin against God but not human beings), false teaching (a sin against both God and people), harm against one’s self, or harm committed against someone else. The type of *protocol for resolution* also broadens: If another Christian has sinned, *anyone* can approach that person. In the specific event that the Christian has sinned against someone else, someone other than the victim *can* approach the sinning person first. For example, Elaine Ramshaw, associate professor of pastoral care at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, after considering various real life cases of power differential between the victim and the offender, advises this: ‘thus it could be someone other than the victim who confronts the offender.’<sup>1</sup> This also implies that the person who feels wronged could in fact seek professional, legal, or church-related help in some appropriate way to address their offender, prior to confronting the offender, and without the offender’s permission or prior knowledge. The goal of such action must not be to build a coalition or apply psychological pressure, but to understand the issues and the grounds on which restoration of the one, and/or the reconciliation between the two, can happen. Perhaps the victim needs help understanding his/her own experience to determine whether there was sin in the first place. Perhaps the victim needs accompaniment entering into the dialog. Perhaps the victim needs to exit the situation immediately and let someone else initiate or continue the dialog with the offender. Any of these cases are reasonable. Hence, talking to your fellow Christian *privately* is not identical with talking *exclusively* with that person.

Thus, I would not make such an iron-clad rule eliminating third party involvement when the Scripture we must base that on is seriously affected by a manuscript question underlying it. It is not a stable foundation

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Power and Forgiveness in Matthew 18’, *Word and World*, Volume XVIII, Number 4, Fall 1998, p.399

on which to build a case. In fact, in cases like this, the shorter version of the text is usually preferred: Notice how manuscripts Sinaiticus and Vaticanus also have the shorter ending of Mark 16, ending at 16:8; the shorter, more dramatic ending coheres with the rest of Mark's Gospel better; the longer ending has literary anomalies. So, based on the manuscript question alone, it is inadvisable to make strong conclusions using the longer version of Matthew 18:15. It is making too much of a case on too little evidence. Moreover, further examination of Scripture as a whole makes that conclusion not only inadvisable, but highly unlikely.

*The Canonical Question: What does the whole Bible indicate?*

Our understanding of third parties in conflict situations between believers also depends on our ability to simultaneously keep other parts of the Scripture in mind. People who are third parties to conflicts have a long and illustrious history in the people of God. Abigail wisely averted David's attack on her husband Nabal after he foolishly disdained David's polite request for support in exchange for the protection David had already given (1 Sam.25). The prophet Nathan challenged King David with a clever device eliciting David's anger, which then boomeranged back on a stunned David (2 Sam.12). Barnabus advocated for Paul before the other apostles, who viewed him with suspicion and distrust but then extended their trust and partnership to him (Acts 9:26 – 29). And Paul, writing to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, sought to avert a conflict between them (Philemon).

Yet at times, this role has seemed unpredictable, and even quite startling. Abigail 'did not tell her husband Nabal' of the large amount of supplies she gave David to make peace with him (1 Sam.25:18 – 31). David had the conflict with *Nabal*, but *Abigail* intervened without her husband's permission or knowledge, and misrepresented him. This is astounding. Today, the Western church would not tolerate in the slightest a wife settling a conflict on behalf of her husband without his consent; most would not tolerate a husband settling a conflict on behalf his wife without her consent either. But for his part, David shows that this was a real transaction, even though he did not deal 'exclusively' with Nabal, the man with whom he had the conflict; instead, David accepted Abigail's offer and viewed the conflict as resolved, albeit in a very unusual way. Much to the further astonishment of the modern reader, God retroactively sanctioned Abigail's action: When Abigail told Nabal what she had done, Nabal had ten days to repent and beg David for forgiveness, but he did not, so God struck him dead. Abigail was right.

The prophet Nathan entered the conflict King David perpetrated against Uriah and Bathsheba, whereas in ordinary circumstances that role would normally have fallen to Uriah's next of kin. The family of Uriah, if it existed, now had the most direct conflict with David. Yet there is no sense that Nathan felt like someone else should have dealt with David. And David does not fault Nathan for stepping out of bounds.

Most importantly, the basic conviction formed in Israel and running throughout Scripture is that God Himself is always the third party to any conflict because God cares about every single human life. God is the primary 'witness' to every relationship. This motif overtly begins in the Cain and Abel story of Genesis 4. In the Mosaic laws, we see God creating a covenant family who would not fall into the sin of the first siblings. To do this, God called for human 'witnesses' who would not bear false witness against one another. In this category, various types of third party mediation was given by all manner of people who represented YHWH: any persons, local elders, Levitical priests, individual prophet-judges on circuit like Samuel, the Davidic king, and after Jehosaphat's reform, royally appointed judges in towns with a court of appeals in Jerusalem (2 Chr.19). God as a witness informs what it means to be the human 'witnesses' as counterparts to God in Num.35:30, Dt.17:6 and 19:15, and 1 Ki.21:13. 'Witnesses' are not necessarily people who 'watched' a crime or the conversation between two people in conflict so they can relate to the broader community what happened. In Num.35:30, two or three 'witnesses' must carry out the sentencing of a murder, not because they were present when they saw the murder happen (would such a thing be likely?), but because they were part of the process of discerning the truth of the matter. Similarly, Dt.17:6 calls for 'witnesses' in the case of someone's idolatry and Dt.19:15 restates the case of Num.35:30. 'Witnesses' in Israel are third party people – presumably known and respected – who have some formal power of determination and way of resolving the matter, who will stake their reputations as collateral.

They proactively discern and investigate the truth of the conflict or crime whether they were acting on God's initiative, their own initiative, or at the request of one of the parties.

But that is as specific as Israel was. These 'witnesses' were true or false based on whether they were right or wrong in God's sight, not whether they followed a specific, standard procedure. Indeed, one gets the clear impression that these bodies of mediation and adjudication were rather spontaneous and ad-hoc: Witnesses were responsible for the investigation, trial and sentencing of cases; God raised up prophets spontaneously to serve as third parties; David's son Absalom judged cases (1 Sam.15:1 – 6); a group of elders rallied to exonerate Jeremiah *even over against* a death sentence declared against him by Jerusalem's princes, priests, prophets, and officials (Jer.26), and Jesus was asked to spontaneously adjudicate a dispute over land inheritance (Lk.12:13). This shows that Israel saw YHWH as living and present between people in any conflict. In the David and Nathan episode, God is the one who knows David's sin, and He does not wait for someone else to confront David. God is therefore the unpredictable element. As the divine 'third party,' He can bestow supernatural knowledge to other human 'third parties' who would uphold His interest in maintaining both the truth of His character and the unity of His covenant family around His character. He can even summon people to get involved in a conflict without the consent of one or both disagreeing parties.

Hence, God's use of 'witnesses' and human third parties continues in the New Testament and does not conform to an understanding that the proper way to resolve conflict is for the two parties in conflict to 'exclusively' initiate the conversation. Barnabus forced the disciples in Jerusalem to face their conflict with the newly converted Saul *without their consent*. He brought Saul to the apostles, disregarding their concerns about him, and apparently without being invited to do so. From a human standpoint, he took a risk, exposing the Christian community to a recent convert whose conversion may have been doubted: Maybe the fire-breathing Saul was only pretending to be one of them? Maybe Saul's conversion was genuine, but his bursting-at-the-seams intellect, combined with his 'extreme' personality, lack of diplomacy, and willingness to be quite forceful would get the whole Christian community in trouble? The latter fear was quite on target. Saul the Christian caused trouble and drew attention: The Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem tried to kill him. 'When the believers heard of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus' (Acts 9:30). Though there is a happier ending to this story of Saul, of course, my point lies in the role of Barnabus as a third party. Barnabus entered into a conflict where he was not directly involved before; neither the apostles nor Saul invited him to play this role. If there was an understanding that conflict is to be handled 'exclusively' by the parties in conflict, at least initially, Barnabus does not demonstrate it, nor does he apologize for having violated it for some greater potential good.

Paul writing to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus is especially significant. Did Onesimus 'pull an emotional string' and get Paul to 'take a side' prematurely? Didn't Onesimus technically sin against Philemon by running away? Did Onesimus 'gossip' to Paul by telling him about a conflict he already formally had with Philemon – since he ran away – which he would still experience once he returned home? If Onesimus was afraid of a conflict with Philemon, then shouldn't Paul have at least heard Philemon's side of things first? Or, should Paul have refused to involve himself at that point, letting Onesimus return and try to work things out with Philemon first? Instead, Paul preempts Philemon's response without Philemon inviting him into the conflict. If Paul believed that Christians in conflict should begin their processing 'exclusively' with each other, then how could he suddenly make an exception for himself? Wouldn't he be hypocritical here? The much easier and simpler explanation is that such an understanding did not exist.

If we are surprised at these incidents and how regularly they occur in Scripture, it may be because we inherit the individualism of Western culture, where conflicts are held to be matters between two lone individuals. We also assume that other individuals are simply easily swayed people who must be kept ignorant of real crises. But the culture that Jesus inherited, and that the Bible takes for granted, is that (a) individuals are always a part of family and tribal (organizational?) units, and therefore third party representatives are always important; (b) God is always involved and can do somewhat unpredictable things within the larger framework He created, that is: (c) God has created His covenant family to have an atmosphere of mutual obligation towards each other, so that any third party to a conflict has an 'overlapping responsibility' to understand and help resolve the conflict in an appropriate way, not to simply 'take a side.' This understanding of the biblical record underscores the importance of precise Christian

teaching on appropriate third party involvement, and supports what I think Matthew truly intended in 18:15: ‘talk to your brother *privately*’ is not to be strictly identified with ‘talk to your brother *exclusively*.’

*The Formal Question: What does Matthew 18 mean for interpersonal reconciliation, third parties, and gossip?*

Matthew 18:15 – 17 and Luke 17:3 – 4 should be taken together here.

<p>Mt.18:15 If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. <sup>16</sup> But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. <sup>17</sup> If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.</p>	<p>Lk.17:3 Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. <sup>4</sup> And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.</p>
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In both Matthew and Luke, the topic of the restoration of a fellow believer who sinned follows a significant section on evangelism and the welcome of new believers (‘Gentiles’ in Mt.14 – 16 and ‘tax collectors and sinners’ in Lk.15). Very similar language is used. This is only natural, since Jesus needed to answer both questions and he naturally used the same categories of thought.<sup>2</sup> Mt.18:15 – 17 is framed by the need to bring a lost sheep back into the fold (18:10 – 14). Whereas Luke uses the ‘lost sheep’ parable to refer to unbelieving ‘tax collectors and sinners’ in Lk.15:3 – 7, in Matthew’s case, the ‘lost sheep’ represents the believer who has sinned. Again, at that point, the sin should not be interpreted as strictly being an interpersonal one; this is any sin. Matthew therefore says the same thing as the other ‘rebuke and correction’ passages found throughout the New Testament (Paul in Galatians 6:1 concerning believers generally<sup>3</sup> and 1 Timothy 5:19 – 20 concerning elders in particular<sup>4</sup>). Those same passages certainly include ‘interpersonal reconciliation,’ but are not limited to them.

<sup>2</sup> In Luke, 15:1 – 17:10 is one large literary unit. Jesus has responded to the Pharisees’ accusation that he eats with tax collectors and sinners (15:1 – 2) by telling the three parables of the lost sheep, coin, and sons (15:3 – 32) and confronting the Pharisees’ materialism and exclusivism (16:1 – 31), the sins that keep them from embracing the lost. The natural question that arises for both Jesus and the disciples is how the disciples can embrace the lost in the same way Jesus does. Jesus therefore warns the disciples (17:1) about the danger of being someone who puts ‘stumbling blocks’ in the way of the lost, the ‘little ones.’ Jesus says it would be better for him if ‘a millstone was hung around his neck and he was thrown into the sea’ (17:1 – 2). This is the context of Luke 17:3 – 4. Jesus repeats the words ‘sin’ and ‘repent’ in 17:3, which point back to the way the words ‘sin’ and ‘repent’ were used in 15:2, 7, 10, 18 and how ‘sin and repentance’ were pictured in story form in the parable of the two sons. If the disciples experience a ‘younger son’ who sins and repents, they are to receive him back (17:3). The disciples are to certainly ‘rebuke him.’ But no mention is made here, or anywhere in Luke for that matter, of a rigid protocol about how to confront him. Who should rebuke him? An individual? Which individual? ‘Leaders?’ If Luke was aware of any such protocol, he did not write it down. Then Jesus in 17:4 considers the case when that brother ‘sins against you’ in particular, as opposed to sins but not specifically against you, but then returns repentant. In that case, the disciples are to forgive. The idiom ‘seven times a day’ is to be taken as an outrageous number of times in one day that one person could offend you. The disciples, aware of how newer ‘brothers and sisters’ who before had been tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and who knows what else, could sin generally or against them in particular, cry out, ‘Increase our faith!’ (17:5). Jesus responds with both encouragement and a check on their desire to be thanked for such difficult emotional and spiritual work (17:5 – 10).

<sup>3</sup> Paul tells the Galatians how to handle a fellow believer engaging in some form of sin. This passage is undeniably broader than interpersonal conflict, since he seems to view a lapse into Judaic legalism as the doorway back into ‘the works of the flesh’ listed in 5:19 – 21. Since Paul has just provided a long list of sins, it is natural to read 6:1 in that context: ‘Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.’

<sup>4</sup> Paul gives Timothy guidelines on how to handle charges against elders in 1 Timothy 5:19 – 20. Whether these charges are personal (e.g. the elder sinned against me) or impersonal (e.g. the elder did not teach the truth or lead well) in nature is not specified. In other words, the problem this passage covers seems to be broader than interpersonal conflict, so the best we can do is assume Paul meant both personal and impersonal concerns. Furthermore, Paul’s remedy is similarly general. Timothy must consider charges against an elder only on the evidence of two or three

Then in Mt.18:18 – 20, Jesus gives a reflection on the spiritual power Jesus invests in the process, namely two or three members of the Christian community. Jesus takes Israel's concept of two or three human witnesses here, making it important to understand the role of a witness in the Hebrew Scriptural tradition which I described above: Witnesses have some formal commission of determination. Witnesses act with an explicit intention to investigate the whole matter and are prepared to publicly disclose their findings, staking their reputation as collateral. They are not simply 'any third parties.' Hence, other third parties could have a role: between stages zero (a believer sins) and one (private confrontation), stages one and two (two or three witnesses), and stages two and three (broader disclosure and limitation of fellowship). Third parties could clarify the issues, give courage and coaching to the one who will do the private confrontation, be someone the believer who sinned will more likely listen to, etc.

Only after this foregoing discussion does Peter (Mt.8:21) raise the question about personal sin against him that requires the exercise of his personal forgiveness. Jesus then instructs the disciples to forgive, not seven times a day as in Luke, but seventy times seven without reference to a time span (Mt.18:22) adding to that the parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt.18:23 – 35). In either case, the meaning is the same. This mirrors the development of thought from Luke 17:3 to 17:4, where Jesus answers the implicit question of interpersonal reconciliation (17:4) as a subset of sins generally committed (17:3). With regards to the question of third party involvement in interpersonal conflicts, what is true of the general case (of sin) is true for the subset (of personal offense). Surely defamation ('false witness') must be avoided, and great care must be taken with that, but talking *privately* with someone who sinned against you is not exactly the same as talking *exclusively* with that person. What opens up before us is the need to give much more thorough and nuanced training on the role of third parties in such cases.

For example, when a believing husband seeks advice on his conflict with his wife, and seeks it from a group of male Christian friends, I think he may be assured that this is not to be regarded as a violation of Matthew 18 on the basis of 'gossip.' Nor is he assuming that these male friends will suddenly find themselves in the role of 'witnesses' and feel obligated to then intervene formally. Hopefully, he can trust that his male friends will still treat his wife with the same level of respect and honor they did before. And in the best of circumstances, the husband can even trust that his male friends will prioritize his marriage relationship even higher than issues of simply who is right and who is wrong. Cases of third party involvement like this occur all the time, with various relationships and in various permutations. In many cases, or at least under various conditions, that third party involvement is understood by many, explicitly and implicitly, as appropriate. After all, the community surrounding a couple took a vow at the wedding to uphold the marriage; they have an overlapping responsibility, along with the husband and wife, to uphold the marriage.

Overlapping responsibility affects third parties when they see a conflict. For example, I as a supervisor have an overlapping responsibility with my staff to accomplish a goal. So one of my staff can first come to me with a negative feeling s/he feels about a fellow co-worker, because it may actually be that I as their supervisor didn't divide the work up between them clearly, etc. I also have the ability to train the other person better, change the nature of their partnership, change someone's assignment, counsel the staff with a grievance on how to handle the situation, etc. I can think of many situations where this has actually been the case, and when it's been effectively dealt with. Of course, I can direct the staff to approach the co-worker directly, and often do. But it's often been helpful for the staff to ask me for help in understanding the co-worker first.

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'witnesses.' Whether the witnesses must feel concerned about the elder independently of each other is unspecified. Whether the witnesses could confer with each other about approaching Timothy is unspecified. Whether the witnesses are talking to Timothy because they have already exhausted conversation with the elder in question is unspecified. There is nothing in the passage to deny Timothy a representative role: People could approach him first, and then on the basis of Timothy's collection of charges, he would investigate their validity. Nothing here suggests that people must confront the elder first, before expressing their concern to Timothy, although of course nothing here suggests that people must express their concern to Timothy first, either.

I think it is possible to extend this concept of overlapping responsibility outside a formal organization of employment. A third party (friend, counselor, etc.) may not have any supervisory responsibility or authority over the two parties, but does have the responsibility to maintain the unity of the body of Christ as much as the two parties in conflict. Here are some situations I've seen where I think it is acceptable for person A to approach person C about a conflict with person B: college age children (in particular in my case as a campus ministry staff) having a complex conflict with parents (who I may also know), or anticipating the start of a conflict; a Christian having a conflict with a person who may not really be a Christian after all; a girlfriend considering breaking up with a boyfriend; an employee seeking knowledge about appropriate legal rights or organizational protocol on how to relate to a supervisor, peer co-worker, or supervisee; a person having negative feelings about a person of another culture, generation, gender, etc., seeking perspective about cultural dynamics that could be at work; a person seeking perspective on herself or himself because of the impact they've observed of themselves in relationship with others; etc. In all these cases, of course, I believe person A and person C must explicitly understand that the end goal is not coalition building against person B, but reconciliation. Naturally, I think that passages on anger and reconciliation (Mt.5:21 – 26; Eph.4:26 – 27; Rom.12, etc.) require Christians to work towards the resolution of conflict. I think third parties must be very judicious about what they're entrusted with, and typically encourage the two parties to have the necessary conversation.

But I do not believe that these passages eliminate the possibility of getting third party counsel. Thus, the pragmatic consideration of how we actually apply these notions of 'gossip' and 'third parties' is significant. I suppose one who disagrees with me can argue that a much stricter process of conflict resolution should in fact be followed in every single one of these cases and in all situations like them. But it seems unlikely to me that anyone would actually do that. The very challenge of trying to take a rather wooden interpretation of Mt.18:15 – 17 and apply it consistently shows how unlikely that wooden interpretation is to begin with.

The bottom line is this: How wise is it to take a passage with a serious manuscript question precisely affecting the way the issue at hand would be treated, take the less probable of the two manuscript options, make a fairly rigid interpretation of that option, ignore other very important patterns and passages in Scripture, and apply that interpretation to only some cases, with notable inconsistency in others?