

## **Matthew 18:15–18 in the Service of the Church's Ministry of Reconciliation**

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### **Abstract**

Matthew's gospel could rightly be called the gospel of the Church. The evangelist's insistence on the correct running of the Christian community gives credence to this. Perhaps, the eighteenth chapter of the gospel, with interest on the reconciliation of erring members of the community, is at the centre of this ecclesial concern. This makes it an important chapter in discussing the ministry of reconciliation in the Church. This paper argues that a contextual study of the pericopé of Matt 18:15–18 indicates that unmitigated reconciliation among members of the community is the major concern of the chapter. This is despite the almost disconcerting remark that a brother who sins and has thrice rejected the reconciliatory moves of the offended brother should be treated like a gentile or a tax collector.

**Keywords:** Community, excommunication, gentile, ministry, reconciliation, tax collector.

### **1. Introduction**

Reconciliation is an integral part of the mission of the Church. It could be seen as the ministry of reintegration or reunion. It is reintegration or reunion because it involves a new union with God and his Church or a new union among members of the Church. In fact,

“Reconciliation and Penance in the Mission of the Church” is the theme of the sixth assembly of bishops. The document of this synod realizes that this theme is of major interest for the internal life of the Church and also for all men and women of good will, who seek the most profound meaning to their existence. In other words, individuals, as members of the Church should seek and strive for reconciliation among themselves and also do penance so as to manifest the real face of God among humans. Reconciliation and penance, which take place in the Church and through the Church in the world, are related to the mission of the Church. In the same way, the second special assembly for Africa of the synod of bishops that took place in 2009 had the theme, “The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace”. In line with these two synods, this paper focuses on reconciliation as an important ministry in the life of the Church.

Reconciliation is here seen as the restoration of friendly relations between people. It involves settling of quarrels and making someone accept a disagreeable thing.<sup>1</sup> From a religious angle, “Reconciliation with God, which supposes conversion and penance in man, not only re-establishes the interior unity of man, but involves also his reconciliation with other men and with nature.”

The gospel according to Matthew realizes the importance of this reconciliation. In several passages, the first evangelist calls his audience to a life of reconciliation with God and among themselves. For instance, the Matthean Jesus realizes that reconciliation is so important

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<sup>1</sup> The Concise Oxford dictionary, s.v. “reconcile”.

that if one remembers that one's brother has or does something against one, the person offended has to abandon the sacrificial process already begun so as to seek reconciliation with this brother (cf. Matt 5:23–24).<sup>2</sup> This shows that reconciliation is more important than the ritual sacrifice. One can say that this passage and that of Matt 5:25–26 “are in effect two little parables about reconciliation.”<sup>3</sup> The first parable is set in a ritual context while the second makes use of legal terms. In both cases, the inability to reconcile has very bad consequences. Moreover, forgiveness of offenses is an integral part of Jesus' model of prayer (cf. Matt 6:7–15).

Matthew's insistence on reconciliation among members of the community is perhaps most eloquent in the eighteenth chapter of his gospel. The discussion on this theme begins with the short parable of the lost sheep (Matt 18:12–14) and concludes with the parable of the unforgiving debtor (Matt 18:21:35). The concluding words of the chapter bear clear testimony to the importance of reconciliation and forgiveness among the brethren: “and that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from your heart” (Matt 18:35). This brings out the import of Peter's question and the response of Jesus concerning the unlimited nature of forgiveness among the brethren (Matt 18:21f).

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<sup>2</sup> See Anthony Ezeogamba, “Reconciliation (Matt 5:21-26): Inevitable Condition for Authentic Worship of God.” DOI:10.31227/osf.io/nruxa. Available at <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332823362>.

<sup>3</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Cambridge, Eerdmans, 2007), 202.

Therefore, I intend to study the pericope of Matthew 18:15–18 as part of the reconciliatory efforts of the members of the Matthean community. Seen in the context of the whole chapter, this passage calls for concerted efforts towards regaining an erring brother. Despite the difficulties one may encounter in this venture, the disciple is called to follow the good example of the patient shepherd who sort and found the straying sheep. He is called not to follow the example of the unforgiving debtor who threw a fellow servant into prison. He is invited to forgive as many as seventy-seven times. This means that the remark in 18:17 that the erring brother should be treated as a gentile or tax collector acquires a new meaning in the context of the chapter. The concluding argument of the paper is that the passage is an invitation to the church not to exclude any of her members as an unrepentant and irreconcilable sinner.

## **2. Context of the Matthean Discourse**

An attempt at analysis of the text takes into consideration the literary context. This is important because context determines meaning, to a great extent. In this analysis, I shall adopt B. W. Bacon's Pentateuchal theory which divides the gospel of Matthew into five books. This division takes into cognizance the formula statements at 7:28–29, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1 and 26:1 to formulate a fivefold division of the book. In this sense, our pericope falls within the fourth division. This fourth division begins from 13:54 and runs till the division marker of 19:1. A major concern of this section is Jesus' interest in teaching his disciples and forming the community around him. It seems that in this section the conflicts between

Jesus and the Jewish leaders and the people itself are in the background now. The focus of the teaching complex is on the life of the community. “In the center of this section is the community discourse of chapter 18 with its main themes of love and forgiveness.”<sup>4</sup> It is important to bear in mind that it is within this segment that Jesus promises to build his *ecclesia* upon the rock of Peter (Matt 16:18) and goes on to underscore the important demands on this *ecclesia* (cf. 16:24f.). One gets the impression that the teaching corpus of chapter eighteen aims at underscoring the fact that “this church has to be ‘re-educated’ and organized as the people of God. They have to learn what it means to be the eschatological community of the Messiah: how to live in his presence as a people gathered in his name.”<sup>5</sup> Understandably, Davies and Allison caption 17:22–18:35 “discourse on church administration.”<sup>6</sup>

However, we shall come to see that the focus of the section is more on the call for community discipline. Part of the discourse on community discipline is the call to a life of humility (cf. 18:1–4). The specific theme of the forgiveness of offenses is introduced by the parable of the Lost Sheep (18:12–14), which concretizes the effort of the community to reconcile with offenders. These verses lead up to the means of reconciliation and

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<sup>4</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Studies in Matthew*, R. Selle, trans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 15.

<sup>5</sup> H. C. van Zyl, “Structural Analysis of Matthew 18,” *Neotestamentica* Vol. 16, (1982), 36.

<sup>6</sup> W. D. Davis and D. C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, ICC, vol. 2 (London/New York: T&T Clark, 1991), 59.

forgiveness of 18:15–17.<sup>7</sup> The theme of reconciliation runs through this chapter and is concluded with the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23–35). It is easy to agree with Davies and Allison that the way in which Matthew has written this section “is proof of his deep pastoral concern.”<sup>8</sup> The particular pastoral concern is the need for forgiveness of offences.

Although chapter eighteen is related to the macro context of the gospel, however, it forms a pericopé of its own. This is shown first by the expression “at this time” (18:1) and the fact that all the disciples are involved in the discussion with Jesus, unlike in 17:24–27, where only Peter was Jesus’ dialogue partner. It is also clear that the expressions “kingdom of heaven” (18:1) and “my heavenly Father” (18:35) frame the chapter and give it a unity of its own. There are also five expressions in the chapter which refer to the body of believers. They include *mathētēs* (18:1), *paidion* (18:2, 3, 4, 5), *mikros* (18:6, 10, 14), *adelphos* (18:15 [twice], 21), *syndoulos* (18:28). In the context of the chapter, these terms seem to signify one and the same persons<sup>9</sup> and depict the relationship expected of members of this community, seen variously as disciples, children, the little ones, brothers and fellow servants. Finally, the two parables in the chapter conclude with a general rule (v. 14 and v. 35), which the disciples must keep. While the first parable mentions what the will of the Father in heaven is not (v. 14), the second parable concludes with the way the Father in heaven will treat those who do not forgive (v.

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<sup>7</sup> Davis and Allison, *Matthew*, 751.

<sup>8</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 751.

<sup>9</sup> So also Zyl, “Structural Analysis” 40.

35). Finally, the transition from discourse to narrative, plus the already mentioned division marker in 19:1, show that chapter eighteen is a literary unit and should be studied as such.

However, my intention to study the pericopé of 18:15-18 is to give the study a precise focus. Although the chapter is about discipline among members of the community, this author will try to link it to the ministry of reconciliation in the community of believers. The repetition of the catchword “brother” (vv. 15, 21) indicates that even though the chapter “gives instruction for communal discipline,”<sup>10</sup> it focuses attention on the relationship that should exist among brothers in the community. Hence, the injunctions therein are more fraternal than legal. This has implications for the understanding of the entire chapter, and, by extension, the pericopé of 18:15-18. The analysis that follows will reveal how the entire chapter is aligned to fulfil the purpose of fraternal correction that would lead to unlimited forgiveness of injuries present in the community of those who believe in Jesus Christ, leading to the re-integration of the erring members of the community. This is the task of the Church’s ministry of reconciliation.

### **3. Some Linguistic Considerations in Matthew 18:15–18**

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<sup>10</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 750.

Many scholars have seen Matthew's gospel as an ecclesiastical gospel.<sup>11</sup> This conclusion seems to be confirmed in 18:15-18, which presents a blueprint for resolving interpersonal crisis situations that may arise in the community. The case in view is a conditional one. The conditional nature of the case at hand is shown by the dominance of *ean* (if), which occurs two times in v. 15, once in v. 16, and two times in v. 17. The structure of the pericopé shows the centrality of the role of the church, especially in vv. 15-17.

In v. 15a, we are presented with the possible presence of a sin committed by a brother or sister against another brother or sister in the community, and the suggested response to this offense. This verse functions as “the first of eight consecutive sentences or clauses which recount first a circumstance and secondly a (possible) result. Each circumstance is introduced with *ean* [if], and each result clause is introduced by a verb.”<sup>12</sup> Again, the offense in view is a private one. The fact that the sin is a private offense between two members of the church is

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<sup>11</sup> D. A. Hagner, *Matthew*, WBC Vol. 33a (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), II. lxiii. It has also been seen as a re-edition of pericopés for reading and exposition in this Church's “liturgy of the Word.” G. D. Kilpatrick, *The Origins of the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 57–71. Gundry calls Matthew a handbook for a mixed Church under persecution. See R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd ed., 1994). For Schille, Matthew is a “catechetical handbook.” G. Schille, “Bemerkungen zur Formgeschichte des Evangeliums II. Das Evangelium des Matthäus als Katechismus, *NTS* 4 (1957/8), 101–14). All these point to the importance of the gospel of Matthew for the Church.

<sup>12</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, II.782.



indicated by the use of the singular *eis se* (against you) for the victim of the offense (v. 15) and the singular *ho adelphos sou* (your brother) for the offender (two times in v. 15).<sup>13</sup> Also, the use of the family language (*adelphos*) evokes imageries of personal care. Hence it is not appropriate to interpret the passage from the point of ecclesial censure.<sup>14</sup> This personal care reflects the pastoral concern for the little ones in the community, which v.10 had demanded. The little one, in this case, is the erring brother, who is to be sought until he is found.

The first proposed action in finding the erring brother (go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone v. 15b) also underscores the private nature of the offense. The offended party is to convict (*elenchō*) the offender of his sin. That is, he/she is to lay open, expose, uncover, reveal and demonstrate the mistake by furnishing evidence to the offender. Thompson feels that the force of the injunction is that “the individual disciple is commanded to approach his brother and attempt to expose his guilt in such a way as to persuade him of his sin.”<sup>15</sup> Just like the sin in question is a conditional one, the outcome of the efforts of the offended brother is also conditional. The possible result of this first attempt at reconciliation is expressed by the result clause (v. 15c). This sub-verse expresses the hope that the offending

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<sup>13</sup> This whole idea connects to Matthew’s use of *adelphos* in other instances, which relate to interpersonal human relationships, especially 5:22, 23, 24. In these instances, the case usually involves a settlement between two brothers.

<sup>14</sup> R. T. France, *Matthew*, 691.

<sup>15</sup> William G. Thompson, *Matthew’s Advice to a Divided Community: Mt 17,22–18,35*, *Analecta Biblica* 44 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970), 178.

party should heed the brotherly confrontation by the brother offended. This means that *akousē* (if he hears) in v. 15c means more than physical hearing with the ear. It rather means “to obey” or “to heed.” And if this happens, the offender has been won or gained back by his offended brother. This is the force of *kerdainō* (to gain), which Matthew applies elsewhere for financial gain (cf. 25:16–17.20.22) or for gaining the world (cf. 16:26). In our present case, it suggests that the brother “was in danger of being lost”<sup>16</sup> and reflects the search the shepherd undertook to find the missing sheep in the preceding passage (18:12-14), where the sheep was in danger of being lost.

However, a likely and unfortunate result of the reconciliatory efforts of the offended brother is presented in v. 16a. Here, the refusal of the offending party to heed the personal reprimand of the offended party is in view. If this happens, then one or two witnesses need to be incorporated (v. 16b). This is in line with the Jewish juridical process, where the witness of two people is enough to sustain a charge (cf. Deut 19:15). However, it must be noted that the aim for involving the witnesses in our present passage is not to bear witness to the offense of the offender, since there is no indication of their presence when the offense was committed. The *hina* clause of v. 16c tells us the reason for taking this step, namely, so that every word or matter (*pan rhēma*) will be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. Again, it is hoped that this second step could resolve the matter and reconcile the brothers.

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<sup>16</sup> France, *Matthew*, 693.

The possibility of the failure of this second alternative to resolve the matter is shown by the circumstance clause of v. 17a. In this sub-verse, the offending party refuses to listen to the offended party and the companions (*ean de parakousē autōn*). It employs a rare word (*parakouō*)<sup>17</sup> to indicate the act of hearing without heeding. It could be seen as “unwillingness to hear” or “to pay no heed to.”<sup>18</sup> If this happens, the result clause of v. 17b indicates that the matter should be taken to the community. This third attempt<sup>19</sup> shows the urgency of the matter and also the role of the community in the discipline of her members. It also manifests the pastoral concern of the pericopé already alluded to.

Despite this urgency, the possible response of the offender to the one offended in v. 15 and the witnesses in v. 16 could be the same response to the community. The offending party could be unwilling to listen to the community (notice the use of *parakouō* again). When this happens as v. 17c suggests, there seems to be no other option left than to treat such a one as a Gentile (*ho ethnikos*) or a tax collector (*ho telōnēs*). It is this conclusion that has endeared the passage to excommunication interpretations among some Christian denominations. However, before, going into a study of the implication of this verse, it is important to note that

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<sup>17</sup> This word is used again only in Esther 3:3 (LXX) and Mark 5:36.

<sup>18</sup> James Strong, *The New Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, Red letter ed. (Thomas Nelson, 2010), entry 3878. It is the refusal to heed sound counsel.

<sup>19</sup> This could also be a literary device which manifests Matthew's love for the application of triads. For the use of triads as a Matthean literary device, see D. C. Allison, “The Structure of the Sermon on the Mount,” *JBL* 106 (1987), 423–45.

this conclusion involves the offending party and the brother/sister offended.

Meanwhile, v. 18 makes a connection between heaven and earth with reference to the binding and losing power of the disciples of Jesus. This concluding verse of our pericopé asserts that whatever the followers of Jesus bind or lose on earth would be bound or loosed in heaven. This verse seems to recall the *leitmotifs* of the chapter. One is reminded of the question of who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (v. 1) and the answer that the little child represents the greatest in the kingdom (v. 4) because their angels in heaven are continually before the presence of the Father in heaven (v. 10). It also recalls the will of the heavenly Father that none of the little ones should be lost (v. 14) and the promise that whatever the two of the members of the community agree on earth will be granted by the heavenly Father (v. 20). It also recalls the final words on the punishment that would be meted by the heavenly Father on all those who fail to forgive (v. 35).<sup>20</sup>

#### **4. Some Source-critical Issues**

A comparison between the synoptic gospels reveals that Mark and Luke lack interest in the community discourse developed by Matthew. While Mark completely ignores the issue of the sin against a brother, Luke seems to

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<sup>20</sup> Does this mean that Matthew is considering the relationships within the kingdom of heaven? Zyl thinks so. See his “Structural Analysis,” 37. If that is the case then the kingdom of heaven is realizable among the followers of Jesus when they forgive one another as Jesus teaches.

mention it only in passing. For Luke, if your brother sins, rebuke (*epitimaō*) him, and if he repents, forgive him even if this happens seven times a day (Luke 17:3-4). In the first place, Luke does not indicate that the sin is between two brothers. Secondly, there is no thought of what the possible action of the brother doing the rebuking would be if the sinner refuses to repent after the rebuke. One is left to assume that since we are left with conditional statements, it is safe to conclude that the repentance of the offending brother is the only condition for forgiving him. Hence, lack of repentance should lead to lack of forgiveness. Luke's lack of reference to the role of the community in the resolution of the offense is very striking. Again, the surrounding materials of the Lukan passage do not give a clue to the interpretation of the passage.

On the other hand, one could consider Matthew's passage as following strictly on the recommendations of the O.T. Lev 19:17 (LXX) enjoins the Israelite not to harbour hatred for his brother. Rather, he should reprove (*elénchō*) his/her countryman/woman firmly. This is the exact word Matthew uses to express the act of firm rebuke or correction. Just like in Matthew 18:15, the word here means "reprove" or "rebuke" and it invokes a forensic sense, that is, to argue one's case.<sup>21</sup> It is also instructive that the Levitical injunction comes in the context of moral and religious regulations to the Jews. Hartley has even argued that "the decrees in the immediate context are concerned with justice in the

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<sup>21</sup> John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, WBC 4 (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 316. This is the sense one derives from the application of the word in Job 13:3.15.

court... [hence *elénchō*] has to do with taking one's complaint against another to court."<sup>22</sup> For us, this is not clear in the text. What is clear is that Matthew seems to have transformed these regulations to the realm of Church discipline and has inserted them into the mouth of the earthly Jesus as though the Church, as an organized entity, were existent during that time. This goes to confirm the already-stated Matthean interest in the ecclesia and our interest in studying the passage with reference to the role of the church's ministry of reconciliation.

## **5. A Possible Meaning of “treat as a Gentile or Tax Collector” in Matt 18:17**

There are at least two possible ways of understanding the expression, “treat as a gentile or tax collector,” in our passage. The first way is to look at the use of these terminologies in Matthew's gospel. Another way is to look at Jesus' treatment of gentiles and tax collectors, who had contact with him during his ministry. These different ways could lead to a better appreciation of the implication of the expression, “treat as a gentile or tax collector,” in 18:17.

Firstly, our passage uses the term, *ethnikos*, to designate “gentile.” One has to reckon that *ethnikos* is a flexible Greek term, which one has to be cautious in applying. Also Matthew uses it in several different senses.<sup>23</sup> Already, the Sermon on the Mount, which functions as

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<sup>22</sup> Hartley, *Leviticus*, 316.

<sup>23</sup> Anthony, J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 79.

*magna charter* for discipleship, had used “gentile” (*ethnikos*) and “tax collectors” (*ho telōnēs*) together in 5:46-47 as negative moral models. Instead of the universal love, which the Sermon on the Mount advocates, the gentiles and tax collectors love only those who love them. The followers of Jesus should not be like them. In the same vein, one should not emulate the prayer patterns of *hoi ethnikoi* (the gentiles), in 6:7.<sup>24</sup> Their long prayers seem to be a manifestation of their lack of faith. The Sermon on the Mount also uses *ta ethnē* to describe the gentiles. *Ta ethnē* of 6:32 are those who worry too much about food and clothing. Instead of worrying about food and clothing, the disciples of Jesus should seek the kingdom of God and its righteousness (Matt 6:33). The conclusion from the above is that the Sermon on the Mount already sees the gentiles (both *ethnikos* and *ta ethnē*) as well as the tax collectors as people not to be emulated. It is very striking that only Matthew contains this material of teaching in his gospel. Apart from this, Matthew shares materials with Mark and Luke in noting that the rulers of the gentiles (*hoi archontes tōn ethnōn*) lord it over their subjects (Matt 20:25//Mark 10:42//Luke 22:25). They are a negative model for the followers of Jesus, for whom leadership is service.

When one combines the sequence of the narrative in Matt 18:15–17 with this negative characterization of the gentiles and tax collectors in the gospel, one is tempted to conclude that the Matthean phrase, “treat as a gentile or tax collector,” in 18:17, represents the traditional Jewish

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<sup>24</sup> See Saldarini, *Community*, 77; Hans Dieter Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 366f.

contempt for gentiles and tax collectors.<sup>25</sup> It also resembles the OT practice of cutting a person off from Israel's assembly (e.g., Gen 17:14; Exod.12:15, 19; 30:33, 38).<sup>26</sup> When applied to our passage of study, it means that the offended party is instructed to suspend normal friendship with the offender, perhaps until he/she repents. After all, after three attempts at reconciliation without success, what hope still remains to win back the straying brother/sister? These considerations led Sim to conclude that we are not dealing with a positive treatment of the brother in 18:15–17 but with a treatment intended as punishment.<sup>27</sup> In the same way, Plummer argues that since “the tax collectors were regarded as virtually heathen and excommunicate, the obstinately impenitent brother is henceforth to be treated as one of them.”<sup>28</sup> It is a similar consideration that lent the pericopé to excommunication interpretations.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, the expression could be seen as injunction by the Matthean Jesus to encourage the excommunication of an offending and obstinate member

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<sup>25</sup> France, *Matthew*, 694; Michael Otto, “Telones” *TDNT* VIII.104; W. G. Olmstead, *Matthew's Trilogy of Parables: The Nation, the Nations and the Reader in Matthew 21.28–22.14* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 81.

<sup>26</sup> C. L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 56.

<sup>27</sup> David C. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 228.

<sup>28</sup> Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (London: Pater Noster, 1909), 254.

<sup>29</sup> See David C. Brown, “The Keys of the Kingdom: Excommunication in Colonial Massachusetts”, *The New England Quarterly* Vol. 67, No. 4 (Dec., 1994), 533.



from the community. In other words, even if the offense is by a one member of the community against another member, it acquires a communal effect in the final analysis. The inability of the offending party to listen to the community means that the person in question has rejected reconciliation with the community. In this line of argument, Meier concludes that “the discipline of ‘shunning’ a fellow Christian would not be effective unless all the other members agreed to implement the decision.”<sup>30</sup> Agreeing to this, Davies and Allison argue that “to treat someone as a Gentile and toll-collector would involve the breaking off of fellowship and hence mean exclusion from the community-no doubt in hope that such a severe measure... would convict the sinner of his sin and win him back... The passage is, therefore, about excommunication. Once a brother has refused to heed the whole church, there can be no appeal to a higher authority, the matter has been settled.”<sup>31</sup>

Some other scholars, on the other hand, agree to the negative depiction of the gentiles and tax collectors in our passage but disagree on the degree of the negative response to be meted to them. This is based on their recognition that since the offense is between two members in the community, the outcome should be between the two parties in question. This is spelled out in v. 15a. The personal pronoun (se) implies that the sin is committed against one member and not against the whole church. France agrees with this view. For him,

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<sup>30</sup> Raymond E. Brown and John P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), 70.

<sup>31</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 785.

The singular pronouns of this paragraph make it very unlikely, however, that these verses should be understood as guidance specifically for church leaders. The subject is dealing with sin within the disciple community, but, remarkably, it is the concerned individual, not an appointed leader or group, who is expected to act in the first instance; the wider community is involved only when that individual initiative proves inadequate, and then only to back up the individual's concern. It may be likely that the gathered community, whose warning has been ignored, will wish to share in the attitude described in v. 17b so that it becomes a community response to unrepentant sin in its midst, but that can only be a matter of reading between the lines...Commentators who use the formal language of ecclesiastical discipline or even 'excommunication' in connection with v.17 seem regularly to fail to notice the singular 'you'.<sup>32</sup>

Even if one agrees with the conclusion of France, one still has to reckon with the fact that the offending member is to be treated negatively by at least the party offended.<sup>33</sup> This is one way of interpreting the passage.

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<sup>32</sup> France, *Matthew*, 690–691.

<sup>33</sup> However, applying the official language of excommunication for the passage is possible if one adds the force of v. 18 to vv. 15-17. This verse gives the preceding pericope a heavenly backing and gives the impression that the community, already built on the rock of Peter (cf. Matt 16:18) represents the will of God. The language of

## 6. A Contextual Meaning of “treat as a Gentile or Tax Collector” in Matt 18:17

We could, however, relate our chosen pericopé to the entire chapter 18. This is what I mean by a contextual reading of the text. This could lead us to the second way of looking at the passage and ultimately to the way that Jesus treated the gentiles and tax-collectors in his company.

Consider, for instance, *adelphos* and *hamartano* occurring in v. 15 and v. 21 as well as the singular pronouns “you” in v. 15 and “me” in v. 21. As already mentioned, such a grammatical usage evokes images of fraternal care, instead of ecclesiastical censure. Also, it does seem that the question-and-answer interplay between Peter and Jesus (vv. 21-22) is a clarification or emphasis of vv. 15-17. The answer that Jesus gave to Peter points to the unlimited nature of brotherly forgiveness. If we are correct in reading the two subtexts together, it means that forgiveness of the erring brother is limitless. Moreover, if we refer to the two parables that sandwich and reinforce this teaching (i.e., the Lost Sheep of vv. 12-14 and the Unforgiving Servant of vv. 23-35), our conclusion seems to be secure. From these two parables we see that allowing any brother to be lost (parable of the Lost Sheep) is not the will of the Father (cf. v. 14) and imprisoning that erring brother (parable of the Unforgiving Servant), something tantamount to

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binding and loosing (v. 18b-c) harks back at 16:19 and seems to stress the authority of the church in matters of discipline of its members.

removing him from the community is not encouraged (cf. v. 30). This seems to be the heart of the “discourse on church discipline” of chapter eighteen of Matthew’s gospel.

Again, if Jesus could serve as a model for his followers, his relationship with the gentiles and tax collectors should also be a blue print for his community. For instance, just as the non-Jewish Magi recognized that Jesus is the king of the Jews (2:1-12), Jesus commanded his disciples to preach the good news to the gentiles (28:19). It is strikingly important that Matthew alone is specific that a tax collector (Matthew) was one of the apostles (10:3). Again, only Matthew recounts the saying of Jesus that tax collectors and sinners are making their way into the kingdom before the Jewish leaders (21:31).<sup>34</sup> Coupled to this are other motifs that Matthew shares with the other evangelists that depict a positive characterization of the gentiles and tax collectors. These include the confession of the non-Jewish soldiers that Jesus is the son of God (27:54); the positive characterization of gentile figures in the gospel (cf. 8:5-13; 21:43; 15:22-28); and the table fellowship that Jesus

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<sup>34</sup> It is, therefore, not necessary to postulate that the pericopé of Matthew 18:15-17 does not come from the earthly Jesus since Jesus has enjoyed table fellowship with the tax collectors and sinners (Matt 9:9-13) and even allowed himself to be named a friend of tax collectors and sinners (Matt 11:5). Contra M. Limbeck, *et al*, *Stuttgarter kleiner Kommentar zu den Evangelien* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2009), 186; W. Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew vol.2*, The Daily Study Bible (Bangalore: St Andrew, 1999), 187.

had with the tax collectors (9:10f; 11:19).<sup>35</sup> Therefore, if the followers of Jesus are to treat one another the way that Jesus treated the gentiles and tax collectors then we shall be a reconciled community of believers.

As our exposition has led us, the teaching materials that bracket the pericopé suggest that the example of Jesus in welcoming the gentiles and tax collectors is the blueprint for his disciples and his *ecclesia*. In other words, even if the gospel of Matthew, in part, classifies the gentiles as negative models, what is instructive is not the way the gospel classifies them but the way Jesus interacts with them. By incorporating them into his plan of salvation, he instructs his followers to do the same. Treating them as Jesus did means welcoming them into the fellowship of the disciples. This agrees with the central message of the chapter which is unlimited forgiveness through reconciliation. This is an integral part of the church's mission on earth.

## **7. Reconciliation: An Indispensable Feature of the Mission of the Church**

The second letter of St Paul to the Corinthians makes it clear that God through Christ has reconciled us to himself and has given us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18). Jesus, who has authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:5), gave this same authority to his Church through his disciples (John 20:21-23). It could be said that

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<sup>35</sup> But this does not mean that the positive characterization of the gentiles and tax collectors in Matthew's gospel enjoys a scholarly consensus. See Anthony, J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community*, 70-75; David Sim, *Matthew*, 218-226.

reconciliation is the mission entrusted to the Church by Jesus Christ.<sup>36</sup> The Church willingly appropriates this ministry as of paramount importance. This explains why the sacrament of reconciliation is one of the pillars of the interaction between the believer and God. This is important because although sin is principally an offense against God, at the same time, it damages communion with the Church (CCC 1440). In the Catholic Church, this sacrament is guided by strict rules that ensure its sanctity.

In our pericopé of study, we have seen the triple effort of the offended member of the community to win back the erring brother/sister. This should be evident in the light of the Church's ministry of reconciliation. Perhaps, the desire of the offended party to bring back the erring member shows the real meaning of the word "ministry" (Lat. *ministrare*), which means "to serve." Even though the minister of this reconciliation is not in the wrong, he strives to bring his erring brother to the right track. In the same line, it is the function of the Church's minister of reconciliation to strive always to bring an erring member of the community back to fellowship. This is where the binding and losing power of the church bears its full force.

Moreover, the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God (CCC. 1445). One might also reverse the above statement by saying that reconciliation

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<sup>36</sup> Ernest M. Ezeogu, "From Evangelization to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: Towards a Paradigm Shift in African Mission Priorities" in Ferdinand Nwaigbo, *The Church and Reconciliation in Africa*, (Port Harcourt: CIWA Publications, 2009) 131.

with God is inseparable from reconciliation with the Church. I could go further to add that reconciliation with the brothers and sisters in the community is indispensable in our reconciliatory efforts with God. In this sense, the minister of reconciliation is encouraged to seek avenues of effecting this reconciliation on the vertical level of the individual member with God, as well as on the horizontal level of the members of the church among themselves. The many places where chapter eighteen of Matthew's gospel points to the will of the father in heaven as blueprint for the life of the community, as well as the notion that the presence of the risen Jesus is assured in the midst of his gathered disciples, give the impression that we are dealing with a relationship that is both vertical and horizontal. The minister of reconciliation should ensure balance on both levels.