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THE USE AND PROCEDURE OF FRATERNAL ADMONITION

ACCORDING TO MATTHEW 18:15-17

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Exegetical Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Sacred Theology

by

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May 1966

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FRATERNAL ADMONITION IN MT. 18:15-17

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The basic purpose of this study of Matthew 18:15-17, as is the case with the valid study of any portion of Holy Scripture, is to determine the message which the Lord Jesus Christ has for His people today. More specifically, this study seeks to determine two things: (1) whether or not there has been an explicit procedure for dealing with the rebellious member of the church, and (2) whether this particular portion of Scripture is applicable to the church today.

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... page was against sin and Satan on the battlefields of this world.

In situations where fraternal admonition has been practiced, it has frequently been done in a legalistic and unevangelical manner. In such cases fraternal admonition has been understood as the mere performance of certain specific actions. The motivation for these actions is generally a distorted sense of duty over against an allegedly divine commandment. Matt. 18:15-17 has especially been the frequent victim of this legalistic approach, which finds in this

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The basic purpose of this study of Matthew 18:15-17, as is the case with the valid study of any portion of Holy Scripture, is to determine the message which the Lord here speaks to His people today. More specifically, this study seeks to determine two things: (1) whether or not our Lord here lays down an explicit procedure for dealing with the sinning brother, and (2) whether this particular section of Scripture speaks only of personal relationships among Christians, or also of formal ecclesiastical discipline and excommunication.

In the experience of this writer fraternal admonition is an element of the Christian life that is largely neglected by most Christians. Conversation with pastors and other church members has led to the conclusion that this is true in the greater part of American church life. Yet the New Testament indicates that fraternal admonition is a vitally important element in the life of God's people as they together wage war against sin and Satan on the battlefields of this world.

In situations where fraternal admonition has been practiced, it has frequently been done in a legalistic and unevangelical manner. In such cases fraternal admonition has been understood as the mere performance of certain specific actions. The motivation for these actions is generally a distorted sense of duty over against an allegedly divine commandment. Matt. 18:15-17 has especially been the frequent victim of this legalistic approach, which finds in this

passage an explicit and regulative method for dealing with the sinning brother. Indeed, at first glance these three verses apart from their context do appear to be a set of regulations which describe a specific procedure which must be followed. William Barclay notes this when in reference to this text he states,

Its difficulty lies in the undoubted fact that it does not ring true; it does not sound like Jesus; it sounds much more like the regulations of an ecclesiastical committee than it does like the words of Jesus Christ.¹

As Barclay here observes, it is unlike Jesus to give His followers explicit and regulative methods which are to be applied universally. Jesus does make very clear the basic principle which is to determine the relationship of His disciples to one another, namely, love. Jesus also clearly indicates that this love will express itself in such specific things as unqualified forgiveness, humble service, non-judgmental attitudes, and the like. But nowhere does He give an explicit method or a regulative procedure for expressing this love in a given situation, whenever such a situation may occur.

Sometimes Jesus did instruct His disciples to follow a definite procedure, for example, when He sent out the twelve to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 10:5-14). But in these instances the procedural details of the instructions clearly refer only to those disciples in that particular place at that particular time.

In Matthew 6 Jesus seems to give specific and explicit instructions regarding the disciples' praying (v. 6) and fasting (v. 17). However, the point of these instructions is that their prayer and

¹William Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), II, 206.

fasting is to be sincere and is to be directed to the Father in heaven; it must not be hypocritical and performed so that other men may see and give glory to them. These words of Jesus still teach us today about personal piety, but they are not to be understood as teaching specific details which must always be followed in praying and fasting.

In Matt. 5:23-24, a passage which, like 18:15-17, speaks of the disciple's personal relationship to a brother, Jesus also seems to give an explicit procedure to be followed. But even here it becomes clear that Jesus is not setting down such a procedure to be followed for all time, but is telling the disciples that love to the brother is of greater import than any cultic performance.²

Nowhere then does Jesus command an explicit procedure to be followed for all time by the disciple in his relationship to another in a certain given situation. So it seems unlikely that He is doing so here in Matt. 18:15-17.

These words of Jesus have also been understood by some to be His specific instructions to Christian congregations regarding formal church discipline and excommunication. However, Jesus seems to have in mind individual disciples rather than the organized church (note the use of the second person singular in these three verses).

It is in the light of these factors--the neglect of fraternal admonition, the frequently legalistic approach, the fact that it is unlike Christ to give explicit methods, and the apparent reference to

²Martin H. Franzmann, Follow Me: Discipleship According to St. Matthew (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 45.

individual disciples rather than an organized group of disciples--that this study was made.

It should be noted that this paper is a study of the text, Matt. 18:15-17, not a study of church discipline and excommunication, nor of fraternal admonition in general. While these topics will be mentioned frequently, they will be treated only insofar as they are related to this text.

It may be well at this point to define several terms which are frequently used in these pages. The word "discipline" as used here is to be understood as the efforts of one or more members of a religious fellowship directed toward the goal of keeping an erring brother as a member of that fellowship. "Church discipline" refers to the activity of the organized church (usually a local congregation) in dealing with erring members. The term "ecclesiastical excommunication" describes the organized church's "punishment of a church member, for error in doctrine or morals, by temporary or permanent exclusion from the sacraments or from membership."³

The presentation of this study will begin (following this introductory chapter) with a preliminary examination of the text and the context. Then the Old Testament and Judaistic background and parallels will be examined. Following this there will be given a review of the history of how the Church has used and understood these words of our Lord, beginning with the Apostolic Age, then moving on through the Fathers, the Reformation and post-Reformation periods, and the modern

³M. H. Pope, "Excommunication," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, edited by George Arthur Buttrick (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), E-J, 183.

era. A separate chapter will be devoted to the interpretation of this passage in The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod. After this overview of the history of the interpretation of Matt. 18:15-17, this writer will give his own interpretation in a chapter devoted to an exegetical analysis of the text.

Matt. 18:15-17 is currently receiving renewed study. In a recent article titled, "Living Toward One Another with the Word of God," and subtitled, "A Study of Mutual Care and Discipline in the Church," Professor Harry G. Coiner discusses Matt. 18:15-17 at length.⁴

The sources and resources used in this study are indicated in the footnotes of the pertinent chapters and in the bibliography. In order to give the reader an understanding of the approach used in chapters 4-6, some comments are made at this point concerning the sources from which the data for the history of the Church's interpretation of Matt. 18:15-17 were taken. An attempt was made to check every reference to this text in both the Greek and Latin series of J. P. Migne's complete patrology. Due to incomplete indices of Scripture references in Migne's editions, it appears that this attempt was not completely successful. The Scripture index to the Greek series lists references by book only, and not by chapter and verse.⁵ The index to the Latin series lists the references by book and chapter only.⁶ In both indices it appears

⁴Harry G. Coiner, "Living Toward One Another with the Word of God," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXXVI (October 1965), 613-647.

⁵Ferdinandus Cavallera, Indices, unnumbered volume in Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca, edited by J. P. Migne (Paris: Fratres Garnier, 1912), col. 152.

⁶J. P. Migne, editor, "Index Sacrae Scripturae Capitum,"

that only those references are listed where the Scripture passage is specifically discussed by a writer; a mere reference to a verse from the Gospel according to St. Matthew made in a discussion of another Scripture passage or topic, for example, apparently is not listed in the index. In making the present study, this writer checked every Matthew reference listed in the Greek index and every Matthew 18 reference listed in the Latin index. In addition, all the Scripture reference indices of The Ante-Nicene Fathers⁷ and of A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church⁸ were checked. The data presented in chapter four are based upon these references. While this study of the Fathers' interpretation of Matt. 18:15-17 is therefore not exhaustive, it is very probably sufficient in determining with reasonable accuracy how the Fathers understood and used this text.

Dr. Martin Luther's interpretation of Matt. 18:15-17 presented in chapter five is based upon a study of the references listed in the indices of the American and St. Louis editions of his works, and of the anthology compiled by Ewald M. Plass.⁹ All references to the text in the Book of Concord were checked. For the period following the

Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina (Paris: J. P. Migne, 1863), CCXIX, 113-122.

⁷Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, editors (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885-1897), passim.

⁸Philip Schaff, editor (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1886-1917), passim; Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, editors (second series; New York: The Christian Literature Company; Oxford and London: Parker & Company, 1890-1925), passim.

⁹Ewald M. Plass, compiler, What Luther Says: An Anthology (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), III, 1660.

Reformation up to the present time, representative interpreters were selected and studied.

In gathering data for chapter six, which discusses the interpretation of Matt. 18:15-17 in The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, all references to the text in the Concordia Theological Monthly, as listed in the Index to Concordia Theological Monthly 1930-1959,¹⁰ were studied. The only available index to Lehre und Wehre¹¹ contains no Scripture index. However, the references listed under Kirchenzucht in this index were studied. Matt. 18:15-17 was referred to in two of these. E. Eckhardt's Homiletisches Reallexikon was checked.¹² In addition, a large number of other writings by leading thinkers of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod were examined. Those which make a contribution to understanding the interpretation of Matt. 18:15-17 in this denominational group are specifically mentioned in chapter six.

Many biblical scholars deny that Matt. 18:15-17 is an authentic logion of Jesus. For some interpreters such denial is prompted by the seemingly legalistic tone of the passage. "It is not possible," asserts Barclay, "that Jesus said it in its present form. It is far too legalistic to be a saying of Jesus."¹³ T. W. Manson claims that this text "prescribes a quasi-legal procedure," which is evidence that

¹⁰Theodore E. Allwardt, compiler (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963).

¹¹Register ueber "Lehre und Wehre," Jahrgang I-XXVIII (St. Louis: Lutherischer Concordia-Verlag, 1884).

¹²Homiletisches Reallexikon (St. Louis: Success Printing Co., 1907-1917).

¹³Barclay, II, 206.

this is a later development in the church.¹⁴

Other interpreters are led to deny that these are the words of Jesus by the reference to Gentiles and tax collectors in verse 17. For Sherman E. Johnson this phrase (v. 17b) "is a clear indication that the maxim owes its origin to the later church, and not to Jesus; one has only to ask how he treated such people (8:11-12; 21:31-32) to see that this is true."¹⁵ George A. Buttrick also believes that such words do not accord with Jesus' teaching or acts. Therefore he concludes that these verses (18:15-18) "are not a transcript of his [Jesus'] very words, but a reflection of the thought and practice of the early church."¹⁶ Alan Hugh M'Neile, referring to verse 17b, agrees: "The passage seems to belong to a period of Jewish hostility, which was met in a spirit unlike the Master's."¹⁷

There are divergent opinions among those who deny that this text is an authentic utterance of Jesus in regard to the extent of the church's role in originating these words. C. G. Montefiore assigns it entirely to the later church: "We have, in 15 seq., a piece of ancient Christian law or usage put into the mouth of Jesus."¹⁸ Rudolf Bultmann similarly declares, "It is easily understandable that rules

¹⁴T. W. Manson, The Sayings of Jesus (London: SCM Press, 1949), p. 139.

¹⁵The Interpreter's Bible (New York and Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951), VII, 473.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 472-473.

¹⁷Alan Hugh M'Neile, The Gospel According to St. Matthew (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1915), p. 267.

¹⁸C. G. Montefiore, The Synoptic Gospels (London: Macmillan and Co., 1927), II, 251.

of Church discipline, which become necessary in the course of time, are regarded as his orders (Matt. 18:15-18)."¹⁹

Other interpreters, however, are of the opinion that part of 18:15-17 is a genuine saying of Jesus, or at least has its basis in a genuine saying of Jesus. Barclay sees it as a product of the later church, based on a saying of Jesus.²⁰ M'Neile also states that it is "probable that behind the section lie some genuine sayings."²¹ Montefiore, along with others, believes that Matt. 18:15-20 is probably an expansion of a saying from the Q-source which we have in its unexpanded form in Luke 17:3, where Jesus is quoted as saying, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him."²² On the other hand, Gerhard Barth thinks it is improbable that vv. 15-17 are an expansion of this alleged Q-saying, and states that Matthew added only v. 16b (the quotation from Deut. 19:15) on account of his predilection for appealing to the Old Testament.²³

Thus we see that the two chief reasons for denying Matt. 18:15-17 as an authentic logion of Jesus are these: the seemingly legalistic tone of the passage, and the allegedly derogatory reference to Gentiles and tax collectors.

¹⁹Rudolf Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, translated by Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), I, 48.

²⁰Barclay, II, 207.

²¹M'Neile, p. 266.

²²Montefiore, II, 250.

²³Guenther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth, and Heinz Joachim Held, Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew, translated from German by Percy Scott (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), p. 84.

As indicated earlier, it is indeed unlike Jesus to make a legalistic statement such as 18:15-17 may appear to be. But are these words in fact legalistic? One of the conclusions of this study is that this passage seen in its context is not at all legalistic, but, on the contrary, quite evangelical, and thus quite in harmony with the character of Jesus.

The contention of Johnson, Buttrick, M'Neile and others that the reference to Gentiles and tax collectors in v. 17b does not harmonize with Jesus' loving attitude toward such people is built upon a misinterpretation of what is being said in this verse. The reference here to Gentiles and tax collectors is not derogatory or scornful, but simply a recognition of the fact that these two groups of persons are, generally speaking, outside the fellowship of God's people. Jesus makes the same type of reference to Gentiles and tax collectors in Matt. 5:46-47, when He says,

For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

This writer agrees with the statement of Floyd V. Filson, "Nothing justifies the view that Jesus could not have spoken the words" (Matt. 18:15-17).²⁴ The fact that the Spirit-moved evangelist tells us that Jesus did say these words is sufficient basis for considering them an authentic utterance of the Lord. Therefore this study is made with the conviction that the words of Matt. 18:15-17 are indeed the words

²⁴Floyd V. Filson, A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), p. 201.

of Jesus of Nazareth, and that these words were later recorded here by St. Matthew under the direction of the same Jesus, risen and ascended.

This text (Matt. 18:15-17), which deals with the problem of sin among disciples of Christ, was recorded by a disciple whose personal experience had given him a keen awareness of the separation from God which sin causes, and of the fact that only the grace of the Christ can restore a person from such separation for fellowship with God. In the Gospel, Matthew, the former tax collector who had lived outside the fellowship of God's people, emphasizes that fellowship with God is not possible only by forgiveness, and that separation-causing sin was to be kept away from God's people. Martin K. Franzmann calls attention to these emphases in the Gospel According to St. Matthew and in our text when he writes:

The Gospel is marked by a stern and unsparring opposition to sin, especially with evil It makes it clear that the call to fellowship with the Christ is a call to a never-ending warfare against the evil in man which is perpetually threatening that fellowship. It is no accident that the words of Jesus which impose on the disciple the duty of correcting one who is sinning, and showing brotherly love toward the errant brother is related by one of the most powerful of Jesus' parables, again peculiar to Matthew. (Matt. 18:10-35)

The Gospel According to St. Matthew is constructed around the discourses of Jesus (3:7-12; 5:1-48; 9:13-17; 13:1-52; 18:1-35; 23:1-39), each of which is marked at its conclusion by the phrase (in its own variations), "When Jesus had finished these sayings."

CHAPTER II

MOTIVATION, AUTHORITY, AND METHOD: THE TEXT IN ITS CONTEXT

This text (Matt. 18:15-17), which deals with the problem of sin among disciples of Christ, was recorded by a disciple whose personal experience had given him a keen awareness of the separation from God which sin causes, and of the fact that only the grace of the Christ can rescue a person from such separation for fellowship with God. In his Gospel, Matthew, the former tax collector who had lived outside the fellowship of God's people, emphasizes that fellowship with God is made possible only by forgiveness, and that separation-causing sin has no place among God's people. Martin H. Franzmann calls attention to these emphases in the Gospel According to St. Matthew and in our text when he writes:

His Gospel is marked by a stern and unsparing opposition to compromise with evil He makes it clear that the call to communion with the Christ is a call to a never-ending struggle against the evil in man which is perpetually threatening that communion. It is no accident that the words of Jesus which impose on the disciple the duty of correcting and winning the sinning brother are peculiar to Matthew and that the necessity of perpetual forgiveness toward the errant brother is reinforced by one of the most powerful of Jesus' parables, again peculiar to Matthew. (Matt. 18:15-35)¹

The Gospel According to St. Matthew is constructed around five discourses of Jesus (5:1-7:29; 9:36-11:1; 13:1-53; 18:1-19:1; 23:1-26:1), each of which is marked at its conclusion by the phrase (with minor variations), "When Jesus had finished these sayings."

¹Martin H. Franzmann, The Word of the Lord Grows: A First Historical Introduction to the New Testament (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 179.

Franzmann notes that "each of the five discourses is introduced by a recital of deeds of Jesus which prepare for the following discourses and are in turn interpreted by the discourse."²

Matt. 18:15-17 is part of the fourth discourse (18:1-19:1). Franzmann gives this discourse and the preceding "recital of deeds" (13:53-19:1) the title, "The Fellowship of the Disciples," and finds Jesus here at work separating His disciples from Old Israel while deepening their fellowship with Himself.³ He succinctly summarizes the fourth discourse itself with these words: "The Messiah deepens His communion with His disciples by making their fellowship a fellowship of faith and love, a fellowship in which divine forgiveness holds sway."⁴

The separation of the disciples from Old Israel begins as the people of Jesus' home town synagogue reject Him (13:53-58). Herod the tetrarch rejects the Messiah's forerunner, John the Baptizer, and thus also rejects the Messiah (14:1-12). The separation continues as Jesus draws His disciples away from the "tradition of the elders" (15:1-9) and its inadequate conception of purity (15:10-21). The cleavage becomes still wider as Jesus separates His disciples from Judaism's best, namely, Pharisaic leadership and Sadducean scholarship (16:1-12), and even from the temple and its cultus (17:24-27).⁵

²Ibid., pp. 174-175.

³Martin H. Franzmann, Follow Me: Discipleship According to Saint Matthew (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), pp. 126-127.

⁴Franzmann, The Word of the Lord Grows, p. 177.

⁵Franzmann, Follow Me, pp. 126-135.

At the same time Jesus deepens His disciples' fellowship with Himself and with one another. He does this in the feeding of the five thousand (14:13-21) and of the four thousand (15:32-39), both of which are meals of fellowship. This fellowship is determined by, and dependent upon, faith in Jesus as the Christ (even if He suffers and is killed); it involves the healing removal of every impediment to fellowship; and it results in a new people of God, the church (14:22-36; 15:22-31; 16:13-28; 17:1-23).

Following this "recital of deeds" concerning the fellowship of the disciples, the fourth discourse opens as the proud disciples, full of selfish ambition, reach for personal greatness (18:1). Jesus responds by calling them to turn and become humble like a child (18:2-4). Their selfish pride was accompanied (quite naturally) by a certain contempt of, and a definite lack of concern for, little ones within the new fellowship. This Jesus counters with a stern and unequivocal call to a genuine love and concern which is nothing less than an extension of the incredibly boundless love and concern of the incarnate Lord Himself. Jesus identifies Himself with the child (18:5). Those who are His disciples must use every effort, however drastic, to avoid causing another to sin (18:6-7) and to avoid sinning themselves (18:8-9). They are not to despise even one of the little ones who are so very important and precious to the Father in heaven (18:10); on the contrary, they are to reflect the Father's inexhaustible love and concern for each and every little one, and put forth every effort to find and reclaim a little one whenever he strays from God (18:12-14).

Later in the chapter, following the text under study, in the

Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, Jesus reminds the disciples that their fellowship with Himself and the Father is totally dependent upon the Father's great forgiveness (18:21-35). They live only by God's forgiving Word. Their staggering debt of sin has been fully and freely forgiven. Therefore Jesus calls them to be ready continually to forgive the relatively small debts of the brothers who sin against them. If the disciple refuses to forgive the brother, he is thereby rejecting God's forgiveness. The disciple's fellowship with God is established through forgiveness, and continues to exist only through God's continual forgiveness. The disciples' fellowship with each other also depends upon God's forgiveness and upon their forgiveness of one another's faults. The church, the new people of God, is a fellowship of forgiveness. Therefore when a disciple refuses to forgive a brother, he is breaking his fellowship with that brother. At the same time he is also breaking fellowship with his Lord, and thus drives himself outside the ranks of God's people, just as the tax collectors and sinners, the Nazarenes and the king, the Pharisees and the scribes had done.

Matt. 18:15-17 must be interpreted in the light of this context. The connection of vv. 15-17 with vv. 12-14 is immediately clear. As a shepherd, with unwearied diligence and concern, seeks even one lost sheep, so the disciple must seek the brother who strays from God. Whatever else Jesus tells us in regard to the erring brother in Matt. 18:15-17, this much is clear: the disciple's attitude toward him (the straying brother), and the motivation for approaching him, must be love--God-like, unselfish, seeking love which fervently desires

to preserve and strengthen, or to re-establish, the straying one's fellowship with God and with the disciples; love which, furthermore, urgently and anxiously desires to forgive as the disciple himself has been forgiven.

In the verses immediately following 18:15-17 Jesus indicates that when His disciples deal with the erring brother in the manner described (in vv. 15-17), they are acting with the authority of Christ Himself, who is present in the midst of His disciples whenever they gather (v. 20), prayerfully decide (v. 19), and speak (v. 18), in His name (v. 20). It is through the disciples that Jesus the Shepherd loves, seeks and forgives the brother who strays. Thus it is in His disciples that a person encounters the incredibly selfless love of God. The voice of the forgiving King is heard when the disciples speak, as is also the voice of the Lord who must pronounce judgment (v. 18).

As was noted in connection with the earlier context, sin causes separation of man from God and man from man. Therefore, those who are a part of the fellowship of God must combat the sin that appears in their midst. In 18:18-20 Jesus assures His disciples that when they do combat such separation-causing sin in one another, He is present with them, guiding them in their decisions and in their speaking.

Coiner comments here,

Because they [the disciples] believed that Christ would hear their prayer and because they trusted His presence among them, they would move toward one another with the Word of God to combat the sin that plagued them and so take care of one another

The verses following Matt. 18:15-17 highlight the fact that Christ Himself is involved with His people ("there am I in

the midst of them") and in their decisions one toward another (v. 20).⁶

Having examined the context, we now move to Matt. 18:15-17 itself. Briefly stated, the context has told us what is to be the disciples' motivation in dealing with a sinning brother (the seeking and forgiving love of Christ in His disciples), and their authority for dealing with him as they do (Christ's presence among His disciples). Now the text itself describes the disciples' expression of seeking love as they endeavor to preserve or reclaim a straying brother for fellowship with the Father and His Son.

The question confronting the disciple is this, "What must I, or can I, do in order to keep or regain a straying brother?" The answer which Jesus gives here is formulated as a "three-step method." In the following chapters this paper seeks to understand this answer of Jesus. In light of the context, the following assertion by Franzmann can be made at this point:

The "three steps" prescribed by Jesus are anything but legal prescription and casuistry, although men have all too often understood them so. These are merely the clear-cut expression of Jesus' will for the fellowship of His disciples⁷

A number of questions confront the interpreter as he seeks to understand Jesus' message in Matt. 18:15-17:

1. In what circumstances is the disciple to do whatever Jesus here says?
2. Is εἰς τὸν (v. 15) genuine? If not, is it implied?
3. Exactly what is the purpose and role of the "one or two others" (v. 16)?

⁶Harry G. Coiner, "Living Toward One Another with the Word of God," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXXVI (October 1965), 623.

⁷Franzmann, Follow Me, p. 153.

4. Who is the ἑκκλησία?
5. How does the ἑκκλησία speak to the erring brother?
6. What does a disciple do when he lets a person "be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (v. 17)?
7. What, if anything, does the ἑκκλησία do when the erring brother refuses to listen to it?

Use these
Qs!

With these questions in mind, we proceed in our search for the answers.

The Gospel according to St. Matthew is marked by a rich and constant use of the Old Testament. Thirty-nine Old Testament passages are quoted in this Gospel, but the Old Testament's influence upon it is not confined to these direct citations. "The Old Testament constitutes the ever-present background and the all-pervasive atmosphere of the Gospel."¹ Since this is true, we look at the Old Testament for help in understanding Matt. 23:17-22.

The problem of separation—drawing the veil and people at the veil—of the Fall, and was a constant thought of the Old Testament. When Adam sinned, his fellowship with God was broken (Gen. 3:7-12), and thus also his fellowship with man was severed (Gen. 4). But God graciously provided a substitute for this dual fellowship (Gen. 3:15). Later God called Abraham into His fellowship (Gen. 12) and made a covenant of fellowship with him (Gen. 15). The Lord repeated and renewed this covenant with Isaac (Gen. 26:2-5), Jacob (Gen. 28:13-15), and their descendants at Sinai (Ex. 24). The law given through Moses at Sinai contained many features which taught the people of Israel

¹ Martin H. Frankema, *The Spirit of the New Testament: A Faithful Introduction to the New Testament* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 189.

CHAPTER III

JEWISH BACKGROUND AND PARALLELS

The Old Testament

The Gospel According to St. Matthew "is marked by a rich and constant use of the Old Testament."¹ Twenty-nine Old Testament prophecies are quoted in this Gospel, but the Old Testament's influence upon it is not confined to these direct citations. "The Old Testament constitutes the ever-present background and the all-pervasive atmosphere of the Gospel."² Since this is true, we look at the Old Testament for help in understanding Matt. 18:15-17.

The problem of separation-causing sin among the people of God arose at the Fall, and was a concern throughout the Old Testament. When man sinned, his fellowship with God was broken (Gen. 3:8,24), and thus also his fellowship with man was severed (Gen. 4). But God graciously promised a restoration of this dual fellowship (Gen. 3:15). Later God called Abraham into His fellowship (Gen. 12) and made a covenant of fellowship with him (Gen. 17). The Lord repeated and renewed this covenant with Isaac (Gen. 26:2-5), Jacob (Gen. 28:13-15), and their descendants at Sinai (Ex. 24). The law given through Moses at Sinai contained many features which taught the people of Israel

¹Martin H. Franzmann, The Word of the Lord Grows: A First Historical Introduction to the New Testament (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 180.

²Ibid.

that they must separate themselves from sin, lest sin separate them from God and from His people. The regulations concerning cleanness and uncleanness were daily reminders of the separation-causing aspect of sin and of the necessity of removing it from their midst (for example, Lev. 14,15). Fellowship with God and His people was continually re-established and preserved through the elaborate sacrificial system (Lev. 4-7) and the ritual of atonement (Lev. 16). For serious offenses among the people, such as eating what is leavened during the Passover (Ex. 12:15,19), or the failure of an unclean man to cleanse himself (Num. 19:20), the prescribed penalty was separation from Israel or from the assembly. This process of the removal of separation-causing sin from the midst of God's people, either through forgiveness of the sin or expulsion of the sinner, can be traced throughout the Old Testament.

The Old Testament gave the individual Israelite a responsibility for preserving a sinning brother in fellowship. This is described in Lev. 19:17-18:

You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason with [תוֹכִיחַ, "reprove"] your neighbor, lest you bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

This passage is strikingly parallel to Matthew 18:15 and its context (confer preceding chapter). In both instances God's people are called to speak to the sinning brother about his sin. In both the reproving brother's attitude toward the sinning brother as he approaches the latter is to be one of love. Matthew 18's positive call to forgive the erring brother is stated negatively in Leviticus 19: "You shall

not take vengeance or bear any grudge" Finally, the Lord's declaration in Lev. 19:18, "I am the Lord," suggests a thought parallel to Matt. 18:20, namely, that He is present in the midst of His people.

The importance of the confirmation by the evidence of two or three witnesses is also rooted in the Old Testament. In Matt. 18:16b Jesus is apparently quoting Deut. 19:15. The need for two or three witnesses is also set down in Num. 35:30 and Deut. 17:6. In all three of these Old Testament references the witnesses are needed to provide evidence for convicting a person of a crime. The object in all three cases is to remove sin from the midst of Israel (Deut. 19:19 and 17:7: "So you shall purge the evil from the midst of you"; confer 19:13; Num. 35:34: "You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell; for I the Lord dwell in the midst of the people of Israel").

Thus we find in the Old Testament a number of parallels to Matt. 18:15-17. However, nowhere in the Old Testament do we find a "three-step" procedure for dealing with an erring brother, such as Matt. 18:15-17 apparently suggests, nor even a two-step one.

Judaism

The theology and practice of the Judaism of Jesus' day was quite distinct from that of the Old Testament. Judaism was indeed deeply concerned about purity in Israel; however, as was observed in the preceding chapter, its concept of purity was wholly inadequate, and was certainly not the Old Testament concept. Judaism's method of removing sin from its midst and keeping the nation "pure" was similar to

some of the harsh procedures stipulated in the Old Testament (for example, Deut. 19:19-21), but quite dissimilar from the spirit of love demanded in Lev. 19:17-18 and other passages in the Old Testament.

Judaistic discipline revolved around the synagogue, and involved civil life as well as religious life. From the Talmud and various other sources we learn the pattern of this synagogal discipline. However, "it is difficult to capture the exact picture of what obtained in the time of Jesus. Much of the evidence is fragmentary."³ Aware of this problem, we here attempt a brief description of fraternal admonition and synagogal discipline in Judaism.

The old synagogue derived the duty of bringing back the erring neighbor to the right way--through remonstrance and censure of his sins--from Lev. 19:17. Frequent mention is made in the Talmud of the blessing or adversity which results from the practice or omission of this duty. For the most part, however, this duty appears to have been far more praised than practiced. At the beginning of the second century A.D. we find an utterance of a respected scribe which amounts to a declaration of bankruptcy of the Judaism of that time in the area of the use of brotherly discipline. The problem then was apparently the same as in the second half of the twentieth century, namely, pride. A person was neither inclined to concede to another the right of critic, nor willing to submit oneself to his critic. Several convenient theories were developed which seem to have been aimed at circumventing this difficult duty. From 1 Samuel 20:30-31 was drawn the comfortable conclusion

³Harry G. Coiner, "Living Toward One Another with the Word of God," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXXVI (October 1965), 624, n. 25.

that reprimand and censure are to be halted, in case the person who is reproved responds with blows, curses, or threats. An even more convenient theory was the opinion that the modest, reserved person who restrains from reproving another is more virtuous than one who does reprove.⁴

If one understands Matt. 18:15-17 as setting forth a specific three-step procedure, then the disciplinary proceedings as they apply to brotherly admonition were not as specific in Judaism as those here given by Jesus. The Israelite was to reprove his erring brother, and this should be done repeatedly, if necessary. But for the most part there were no further steps outlined, as in Matt. 18.

While it is true that fraternal admonition was largely neglected in Judaism, this did not mean an absence of discipline. Discipline was exercised by the elders of the synagogal community, and here we find more specific steps that were to be followed, and it is these steps that many authorities believe were in the mind of Jesus as He spoke Matt. 18:15-17.

Synagogal discipline consisted of varying degrees of exclusion from the fellowship of the Israelite community, each step being a progressively more severe penalty. Four words are used to denote these steps: nezifah (נִזְיָפָה), niddui (נִדְדוּי), cherem (חֵרֵם), and shammatta (שְׁמַטָּה). There is little agreement among scholars as to the definition and use of these terms in describing the various

⁴The observations in this paragraph are drawn from [Herman L. Strack and] Paul Billerbeck, Kommentar Zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch (Munich: Beck, 1922 to 1928), I, 787-790.

disciplinary steps. This reflects the incomplete and fragmentary character of the evidence that has been handed down. More will be said about this after we consider what is known about each of these four words.

Nezifah was the least severe penalty, and thus is considered by some to be the first step in synagogal discipline.⁵ Under nezifah the offender was required to remain at home and to abstain from all business and entertainment.⁶ This penalty was pronounced for seven days (in Palestine, but for only one day in Babylonian Judaism). If the offender repented at the end of this period, he was restored to the fellowship. If he did not repent, niddui was pronounced.

Under niddui the erring Jew was forbidden contact with everyone except his wife and children; it was forbidden for others to sit at meals with him, or even to sit within four cubits of him; it was also forbidden to count him in the number necessary for the performance of a public religious function. He was required to don the habiliments of mourning, that is, he was forbidden to bathe, to cut his hair, and to wear footgear. He was permitted, however, to attend the synagogue service, to study the Torah, and to attend the public lectures of the rabbis. Niddui was in effect for thirty days (seven days in Babylonia). Repentance by the offender during this period led to his restoration at the end of it. If he did not repent, but persisted in the offense,

⁵E.g., Jacob Voorsanger, "Anathema," The Jewish Encyclopedia (12 vols.; New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1901 & 1912), I, 561. Hereafter this encyclopedia will be referred to as JE. Cf. [Strack and] Billerbeck, I, 293.

⁶Voorsanger, I, 561.

niddui was usually extended for another thirty days. If he still did not repent, cherem was imposed.⁷

In ancient times cherem, which corresponds to the Greek *ἀνάθημα*, was a "proclamation devoting or consecrating to the Deity persons or things to be excluded from use, or, as was the rule in biblical times, to be utterly destroyed."⁸ Cherem was generally used in connection with war. The practice of devoting the spoils of war--both persons and things--to the god who leads to victory is found among all ancient nations and primitive tribes.⁹ When the Canaanite king of Arad fought against Israel, the latter promised Yahweh that if He would give the Israelites victory, they would utterly destroy (cherem) the enemy and his cities (Num. 21:1-3). Joshua pronounced the cherem upon Jericho and its inhabitants, except Rahab and her family (Josh. 6:17-18). Under cherem the enemy and his cities were destroyed in honor of Yahweh. Directed against idolatrous nations, cherem was used to preserve purity and fellowship among the people of Yahweh.

In post-exilic times cherem as a war measure gave way to cherem as a means of ecclesiastical discipline. Cherem no longer meant destruction, but now meant the confiscation of goods and the exclusion of the person from the fellowship of Israelites (confer Ezra 10:8).

In later Judaism cherem as a measure of synagogal discipline included all the niddui regulations, with some additions: now he was no

⁷Ibid., pp. 560-561.

⁸Kaufmann Kohler, "Ban," JE, II, 487.

⁹Ibid.

longer permitted to be taught or to study the Torah with others (he was allowed to study alone); no one could work for the offender, nor benefit him in any way, unless he was in need of the bare necessities of life. If he died under this ban, a stone was placed upon his tomb, indicating that he was deserving of death by stoning, and all tokens of mourning were forbidden. Cherem was pronounced for an indefinite period. It was considered a permanent ban, although it could be revoked at the option of the authorities, should the offender convince them of his sincere repentance.¹⁰

Some scholars regard shammatta as still another step, referring to the final, entire expulsion of the offender from the congregation.¹¹ However, many others question this position. Voorsanger makes the following observation: "The meaning of shammatta is obscure. In all probability it represents a general designation for every form of ecclesiastical excommunication."¹² Paul Billerbeck suggests that niddui and shammatta were used to denote the same disciplinary penalty, the former being the designation used in Palestine and the latter in Babylonia.¹³

Eliminating shammatta as a separate step, there are then three steps in synagogal discipline, which might in some way be parallel to

¹⁰Voorsanger, p. 561; Julius H. Greenstone, "Excommunication," JE, V, 286.

¹¹E.g., John M'Clintock and James Strong, Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1891), III, 385.

¹²p. 560.

¹³I, 295.

the three steps of Matt. 18:15-17. However, there is no certainty about these three steps, for the evidence supporting this is insufficient. Coiner concludes that "only the distinction between two kinds has been handed down," namely, niddui and cherem.¹⁴ Making the matter even more uncertain is the problem of determining to what extent the practices at the time of the writing of the Talmud (ca. A.D. 370) also obtained at the time of Jesus. At least one student of this problem contends that cherem was the only form of excommunication in New Testament times, and that nezifah and niddui were adopted later.¹⁵

New Testament references to the contemporary Jewish excommunication are found in John 9:22, 12:42, and 16:2. In all three of these the term ἐκπορεύωσιν εἰς ἄλλοις συναγωγαῖς ("to be put out of the synagogue") is used. Such exclusion "could hardly be from a single synagogue, but rather refers to the banishment of the victim from all social and religious fellowship with the Jewish community at large."¹⁶ It is not possible to assert with certainty whether or not this corresponds to one of the disciplinary steps mentioned above. In none of the three Johannine references are other steps mentioned, and 9:22 seems to indicate that the offense immediately results in this penalty, without prior steps.

Many commentators find in Luke 6:22 specific reference to three

¹⁴Coiner, 624, n. 22.

¹⁵G. Mahler, "Discipline in the Ancient Synagog and Matt. 18," Concordia Theological Monthly, IV (June 1933), 412.

¹⁶M. H. Pope, "Excommunication," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), E-J, 184.

grades of Jewish excommunication. On the other hand, Pope suggests that the three terms in this verse are to be understood as synonymous.¹⁷ Again, the evidence is far too insufficient to hold either position with certainty. The most that can be said here is that this probably does have some reference to Jewish disciplinary actions.

Even if we assume that Jewish disciplinary practices of Talmudic times were followed already in the time of Jesus, these shed little light on Matt. 18:15-17. Judaism may have had a three-step procedure, but it is equally likely that it did not. In addition, there are several significant differences between Judaistic discipline and Matt. 18:15-17. These differences help to clarify the latter by way of sharp contrast.

One of the first differences to be noted is that synagogal discipline concerned both ecclesiastical and civil life, whereas Matthew 18 refers to the religious fellowship of Jesus' disciples. In Judaism the elders of the congregation exercised discipline, but Matt. 18:15-17 apparently speaks to the individual disciple's responsibility to the brother. What grades of discipline were used in Judaism progressed to ever-severer punishment, whereas in Matt. 18 we find progressive steps to an ever-widening circle of people. Another significant difference is that in Judaism the offender was excluded from social and religious fellowship in every step, but in Matt. 18:15-17 Jesus calls for the very opposite: associate with, and seek out the fellowship of, the offender; the disciple(s) is (are) to go and speak

¹⁷Ibid.

to the erring brother; and whatever Jesus says in v. 17b, it is highly improbable that he is forbidding social fellowship with the offender, considering Jesus' own social fellowship with tax collectors and sinners on frequent occasions. Judaistic discipline used temporary expulsions, whereas this device is not found in Matt. 18. Yet another very significant difference is the whole approach to the maintenance of purity among God's people. Judaism's approach was legalistic, dependent upon social and economic pressures, upon the corrective effect of punishment, and upon the person's own power to will and to do what is right; the approach in Matt. 18, as already noted in the preceding chapter, is forgiving love, and is dependent upon the power of the words spoken by disciples among whom Jesus Christ is powerfully present, and through whom He speaks and works.

In chapter II we noted the observation that in the preceding context (Matt. 13-17) Jesus is separating the disciples of the New Israel from Old Israel. He seems to be doing this yet in Matt. 18:15-17. Jesus here tells His disciples that their treatment of a sinning brother is to be totally different from that of contemporary Judaism. In the Gospel According to St. Matthew Jesus frequently reinterprets current religious thought and practice in light of the Gospel (for example, Matt. 5), and He is probably doing the same here. "A new principle of action is demanded under the Gospel."¹⁸

The Qumran Community

The Essenes of the Qumran community insisted on the obligation

¹⁸Coiner, p. 624, n. 22.

of holiness, that is, a whole-hearted commitment to abide by the commandments of the Law of Moses as revealed to the sons of Zadok.¹⁹ The members who were thus committed had to keep apart from all wicked men, that is, men who did not walk the Essene path of holiness. Therefore this sect separated itself from mainstream Judaism to live in a separate community, and any of its members who strayed from this path were expelled from its fellowship.

Community discipline was rigidly enforced. Specific penalties were imposed for various sins. Most of these penalties consisted of some form of exclusion from the group for varying lengths of time. For example, indecent talk resulted in a three-month expulsion;²⁰ gesturing with the left hand in conversation, ten days;²¹ slander against the community, permanent and irrevocable expulsion.²²

Qumran also advocated fraternal admonition among its members. The pertinent section of the "Manual of Discipline" reads as follows:

When anyone has a charge against his neighbor, he is to prosecute it truthfully, humbly and humanely. He is not to speak to him angrily or querulously or arrogantly or in any wicked mood. He is not to bear hatred [towards him in the inner recesses] of his heart. When he has a charge against him, he is to proffer it then and there and not to render himself liable to penalty by nursing a grudge. Furthermore, no man is to bring a charge publicly against his neighbor except he prove it by witnesses."²³

Referring to this section of the "Manual of Discipline," G. Ernest

¹⁹"The Manual of Discipline," v, 7-20.

²⁰Ibid., vii, 9.

²¹Ibid., vii, 12-15.

²²Ibid., vii, 15-18.

²³v, 24-vi, 1.

Wright states, "The procedure of neighborly reproof seems to have been precisely the same as that given by Jesus in Matt. 18:15-17."²⁴ Pope flatly declares that Matt. 18:15-17 "corresponds exactly" to the rules of the Qumran sect.²⁵ This use of terms like "precisely the same" and "exactly" in comparing Matt. 18:15-17 and the "Manual of Discipline" are certainly overstatements. Floyd V. Filson comes closer to the truth when he calls the two "similar": "A similar method of dealing with differences within a religious fellowship, with maximum consideration for the offender, appears in the Qumran Manual of Discipline v. 24-vi. 1."²⁶

There are similarities between the Qumran document quoted above and Matt. 18:15-17. As Filson observed, both call for consideration for the offender. The latter is to be approached humbly, in love, and with a readiness to forgive. Both mention a need for witness.

However, the differences are greater than these similarities. Although some commentators find three steps in the "Manual of Discipline,"²⁷ actually there are only two, and these are not progressive steps as appear in Matt. 18; rather, the "Manual of Discipline" mentions two kinds of accusations, namely, private and public. Furthermore, in Matthew the disciple speaks the reproving word in an effort to bring

²⁴G. Ernest Wright, Biblical Archaeology (Abridged edition; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 156.

²⁵Pope, p. 184.

²⁶Floyd V. Filson, A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), p. 201.

²⁷E.g., K. Stendahl, "Matthew," Peake's Commentary on the Bible, edited by Matthew Black (London, New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962), p. 789.

back the straying brother; in the "Manual of Discipline" the effort seems to be only to settle a difference between two members of the community. Whereas Matt. 18's chief concern is to go out and find the lost sheep and to bring it back to the flock, Qumran's concern was to find the spotted sheep among the flock and drive them out. Stendahl takes note of several other differences. He points out that Matt. 18 puts more emphasis on the urgent necessity to go out of the way to forgive a brother.²⁸ In Matthew, he who listens to the rebuke is forgiven without any specified measure of punishment, as was the case in Qumran.²⁹ Closely related to this is the observation by Stendahl that in Matthew there is no gradation of punishments and no short-term expulsions, as at Qumran.³⁰ Yet another difference is that in Matthew the disciple takes witnesses along when he goes again to speak to the straying brother, but in the Qumran scroll the witnesses apparently are needed only to substantiate a public charge against an offender.

In the Qumran community's "Zadokite Document," Lev. 19:17-18 (discussed earlier in this chapter) is quoted to warn against bearing grudges against a neighbor. This implies a call for the opposite, namely, to forgive the neighbor. To this extent it is parallel to Matt. 18. The relevant section reads as follows:

And as to the law which says, 'Thou shalt not take vengeance nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people'[Lev. 19:18]-- if any of those that have entered the covenant bring charges against his neighbor without proving them by witnesses; or if he

²⁸Krister Stendahl, "Prayer and Forgiveness," Svensk Exegetisk Arsbok, XXII-XXIII (1957-1958), pp. 78-79.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Stendahl, "Matthew," Peake's Commentary, p. 789.

brings such charges merely through temper, or if he tells tales to his superiors simply to bring his neighbor into contempt, he ranks as one who takes vengeance and bears a grudge if a man keep silent from day to day and then bring a charge against his neighbor in the heat of anger, it is as if he were laying capital charges against him, for he has not carried out the commandment of God Who said to him, 'Thou shalt surely reprove thy neighbor lest thou incur sin on his account' [Lev. 19:17].³¹

This brief study of the Qumran community's disciplinary practices seems to indicate that both the official community discipline and the person-to-person admonition were legalistic, and were aimed not so much at the welfare of the offender (as in Matt. 18) as at the maintenance of the community's distorted standards of holiness.) The community discipline was largely a penal system, and the fraternal admonition was mostly a matter of settling wrongs in a peaceable manner, without a grudge. The former has no parallel in Matt. 18, and the latter falls short of what Matt. 18:15-17 says. There is no parallel in a "three-step" procedure. Thus, in spite of some similarities, the Qumran Community and Matt. 18 appear far apart in spirit, in purpose and goal, and in method.

³¹"The Zadokite Document," ix, 2-8.

CHAPTER IV

MATTHEW 18:15-17 IN THE WRITINGS OF THE APOSTLES AND THE FATHERS

In his letters the Apostle Paul at times admonishes sinning brothers, and also calls his readers to admonish one another. In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul admonishes the brothers in Corinth in regard to their disunity (chaps. 1-4), their laxity in the admonition of one in their midst (chap. 5), and other sins. "I do not write this to make you ashamed," the apostle makes clear, "but to admonish you as my beloved children" (4:14). In Gal. 2:11-14 St. Paul recounts the occasion when he admonished St. Peter in the presence of other brethren. In Col. 3:16, Gal. 6:1, 1 Thess. 5:14, 1 Tim. 5:20, 2 Tim. 4:2, Titus 3:10-11, and other places he calls his readers to be concerned about, and to rebuke and admonish, one another. This parallels what Jesus says to His disciples in Matt. 18:15.

Another parallel to Matt. 18 is the apostle's call to his readers to forgive one another as they have been forgiven, for example, Eph. 4:32, Col. 3:13, 2 Cor. 2:7. As in Matt. 18, the motivation for rebuking and forgiving the brother is love, as the context of each of these passages clearly indicates.

The refusal to listen to fraternal admonition and persistence in sin calls for a severance of fellowship. St. Paul demands such separation in 1 Cor. 5, 2 Thess. 3:6,14-15, and Titus 3:10-11. One who persists in sin is to be rebuked in the presence of the other brothers (1 Tim. 5:20).

In 2 Cor. 13:1 and 1 Tim. 5:20 the apostle insists that any charge against a brother (apparently made in the presence of other brothers) must be substantiated by the evidence of two or three witnesses. These passages may echo Matt. 18:16, although they are not directly parallel to the latter, where the one or two are to join the admonisher in confronting the sinning brother.

Matt. 18:15 has another parallel in the Epistle of St. James, which closes with high praise for the disciple who brings back to the flock a straying brother:

My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and some one brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins (5:19-20).

This brief glance at the New Testament epistles indicates that the apostles both used, and advocated the use of, fraternal admonition among the followers of Jesus Christ. The attitude toward the sinning brother is to be seeking, forgiving love. Furthermore, in both the teaching and the practice of the apostles, persistence in sin without repentance led to separation of the sinner from the fellowship of God and His people. As in the Old Testament, no sinner's fate could be left in the hands of only one person, but rather the evidence of two or three witnesses was needed before the sinner could be excluded from fellowship.

However, it is to be noted that nowhere in the New Testament epistles do we find anyone either using, or advocating the use of, a progressive three-step procedure in brotherly discipline. On the contrary, Paul's instructions to Titus call for a separation from fellowship after "admonishing him once or twice" (3:10).

As we now proceed to examine the Church's use and interpretation of Matt. 18:15-17, we will first consider the Fathers who treat this passage in their extant writings. These are here examined in chronological order.

Origen

Origen evidently noticed the use of the second person singular in Matt. 18:15-17. In commenting on verse 17, he states that if the offender refuses to hear the church, then he who thrice admonished him is to regard him for the future as a Gentile and a tax collector. But, "He [Jesus] does not say what he will suffer if he does not hear the church." What he will suffer, God knows, but we do not declare it, in accordance with Matt. 7:1 and 1 Cor. 4:5. After the second and third censures, the offender is no longer to be called a brother.¹

In his commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew, Origen does not interpret this passage as referring to excommunication. The three steps are to be followed by an individual. Origen speaks of the "need of the censure in presence of all the church."²

Cyprian

This father quotes Matt. 18:17 (and 2 Thess. 3:6) to show that

¹Origen, "Commentary on Matthew," The Ante-Nicene Fathers, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (10 vols.; Buffalo: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885-1897), IX, 493. Hereafter this edition will be referred to as ANF.

²Ibid.

Christians should have no fellowship with heretics.³ In another place he uses the same verse to support his statement that Novatians are not to be allowed in the Church.⁴

Constitutions of the Holy Apostles

This document instructs the bishop to establish the veracity of the accuser, then to rebuke the accused "according to the doctrine of our Lord," which evidently means according to Matt. 18:15-17. The rebuke--first alone, then with one or two more--is to be given with mildness and instruction, with the goal that the accused repent.⁵

(According to the "Constitutions of the Holy Apostles," v. 17b is a call for excommunication: "Receive him no longer into the Church as a Christian, but reject him as a heathen. But if he is willing to repent, receive him."⁶

Basil

In Letter XXII (A.D. 364) Basil refers to Matt. 18:17b as the last resort when the admonished brother fails to be set right. This final drastic step is taken "for the security of them that are obedient." The one cut off "should be grieved over as a limb cut from the body."⁷

³"Epistle LIV," ANF, V, 347.

⁴"Epistle LXXV," ANF, V, 397.

⁵Book II, section V, ANF, VII, 414.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Basil, "Letter XXII," A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry

Thus Basil apparently understood 18:17b as referring to excommunication of the unrepentant offender. This view becomes even more apparent in Letter CCLXXXVII, where he mentions that everything that is called for in Matt. 18:15-17 has been done in the case of a certain fellow, and he has not listened. "Henceforth," Basil declares, "let him be excommunicated." Echoes of Judaistic practice are heard as he continues:

Further, let proclamation be made throughout the district, that he be excluded from participation in any of the ordinary relations of life; so that by our withholding ourselves from all intercourse with him he may become altogether food for the devil.⁸

Jerome

In the writings of Jerome we find only one brief reference to Matt. 18:15-17. In "Letter CXXV," to Rusticus, Jerome uses this passage to support his assertion that Rusticus should not tell others about Jerome's sins, but should tell Jerome.⁹

Ambrose

This father quotes Matt. 18:15-17a to justify his rebuke of Emperor Theodosius in a letter to the latter. However, the quote is

Wace (second series, 14 vols.; New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1895), VIII, 129. Hereafter this edition will be referred to as NPNE.

⁸Ibid., pp. 313-314.

⁹NPNE, second series, VI, 251.

inaccurate, and reads in part, "then chide him sharply before two or three witnesses."¹⁰

Chrysostom

More extensive references to the text under study are found in the writings of John Chrysostom, which include a homily on Matt. 18:15.

In "Homily XXIII," on Matt. 7:1, Chrysostom refers to Matt. 18:15-17 as an instance when Christ--in contrast to Matt. 7:1--tells us that we should judge, and even punish, one who does wrong. He finds this idea of judgment leading to punishment in v. 17b. These are his words in part:

And how hath He [Jesus] set over us so many to reprove; and not only to reprove, but also to punish? For him that hearkens to none of these, He hath commanded to be "as a heathen man and a publican."¹¹

Chrysostom's "Homily LX," on Matt. 18:15, indicates that he did grasp Jesus' main point here, namely, the attitude of seeking and forgiving love toward the brother who sins. Commenting on v. 15a, Chrysostom gives an explanation of the need for the brother to confront the sinner privately: "lest by the testimony of the many he should render his accusation heavier, and the other, become excited to opposition, should continue incorrigible."¹² "If he listens to you" (v. 15) means, if he shall condemn himself, if he shall be

¹⁰"Letter XL," NPNF, second series, X, 441.

¹¹A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, edited by Philip Schaff (first series, 14 vols.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1886-1917), X, 157.

¹²Ibid., p. 372.

persuaded that he has done wrong. The next words, "you have gained your brother," prompts Chrysostom to point out that not only the brother gains, but you also; before you were both losers--you of your brother and he of his own salvation.¹³ Although he used the word "accusation" (above), shortly after that he notes that Jesus did not tell the disciple to "accuse" the sinning brother, nor "charge him," nor "demand satisfaction," but tell him of his fault, remind him of his error.¹⁴

Jesus' directive to take one or two others along if the sinner does not listen is viewed by Chrysostom as a more powerful and concerted effort to gain the straying brother:

for the more he is shameless, and bold, the more ought we to be active for his cure, not in anger and indignation. For the physician in like manner, when he sees the malady obstinate, doth not give up nor grow impatient, but then makes the more preparation; which He commands us to do in this case too.¹⁵

Chrysostom observes that Jesus commands the person who was sinned against (Chrysostom includes $\epsilon\iota\varsigma\ \tau\epsilon$ in the text of v. 15) to go and reprove the sinning brother, for the sinner is much more likely to listen to the person against whom he sinned.¹⁶ The motive, according to Chrysostom, of the one who was wronged and who goes and speaks to the other is always love. The wronged brother does this because he cares for the other's salvation; the goal is amendment, not punishment,

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

of the brother. Chrysostom repeatedly points out Jesus' concern not only for the one wronged (confer vv. 6-10), but also for the one who wronged him, and how Jesus has provided for the latter by sending the former to him.

"Tell it to the church" (v. 17) is interpreted by Chrysostom to mean, "Tell it to the presidents of the church."¹⁷ According to Erwin L. Lueker, the "president" was roughly equivalent to what we in the twentieth century call the "pastor."¹⁸

Chrysostom seems to have understood v. 17b ("let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector") as meaning immediate expulsion from the church's fellowship, although he doesn't explicitly state this. However, this is implied in his comments on v. 18 when he says that Jesus threatened these things, "that fearing the being cast out of the church, and the danger from the bond, and the being bound in heaven, he may become more gentle."¹⁹ Chrysostom cites Matt. 5:45 and 21:31 to show that Jesus used the tax collector as an example of the greatest wickedness.²⁰ The sinner who will not listen even to the church is "incurably diseased," and therefore is classed with the Gentiles and tax collectors.²¹ Nevertheless Chrysostom seems to hold out some hope

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Richard R. Caemmerer and Erwin L. Lueker, Church and Ministry in Transition (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), pp. 66-67.

¹⁹NPNE, first series, X, 373-374.

²⁰Ibid., p. 373.

²¹Ibid.

for this person when he says that Jesus classed such a person with Gentiles and tax collectors both to soothe and to alarm him; to soothe him, for Jesus received tax collectors; to alarm him, for they were the height of wickedness.²²

Augustine

This father wrestles briefly with the question regarding the circumstances in which Matt. 18:15-17 is to be applied. If you alone know the brother's sin, go and tell him alone, as Matt. 18:15 says; but if many know it, then 1 Tim. 5:20 applies.²³ If you yourself see a brother committing sin, go and rebuke him privately.²⁴ But Augustine recognizes the difficulty in deciding when the brother needs to be rebuked. In Letter XCV, to Paulinus and Therasia, he confesses that he does not know when and how to observe Scripture's rules about judging, including Matt. 18:15.²⁵

(Augustine emphasizes that the motivation for approaching the sinning brother must be forgiving love which seeks to help him.) What Matt. 18:15 describes should be done, but must be done with love.²⁶ Again, in Sermon XXXII on Matt. 18:15, he warns at length, against hate, and demands that any rebuke be done in love. The purpose is

²²Ibid.

²³NPNF, first series, VI, 360.

²⁴Ibid., XII, 266.

²⁵Ibid., I, 402.

²⁶Ibid., V, 491.

never to injure, but always to amend, the erring brother. Early in the sermon, Augustine declares, "Our Lord warns us not to neglect one another's sins, not by searching out what to find fault with, but by looking out for what to amend."²⁷ The sinner is to be rebuked, but not because you are grieved that he sinned against you, for "if from love of thyself thou do it, thou doest nothing. If from love to him thou do it, thou doest excellently."²⁸ When a brother sins against a disciple, he wounds himself as well as the disciple, and the latter should be concerned about the brother's wound, not his own.²⁹ In "City of God" (Book XV, chap. 6), Augustine quotes Matt. 18:15 among other passages which are listed as ones which carefully inculcate mutual forgiveness.³⁰

The importance which Augustine attached to this duty of rebuking the brother as stated in Matt. 18:15 is indicated in this comment on that verse: "If thou shalt neglect this, thou art worse than he."³¹

Augustine paraphrases v. 17b in this way: "Reckon him no more amongst the number of thy brethren."³² But the disciple is still to seek his salvation, like that of any other heathen person.

"Scholia Vetera in Matthaeum"

Matt. 18:15 is discussed briefly in "Scholia Vetera." The rebuke

²⁷Ibid., VI, 357.

²⁸Ibid., p. 358.

²⁹Ibid., p. 359.

³⁰Ibid., II, 287.

³¹Ibid., VI, 359.

³²Ibid.

is to be given in private in order that the one being corrected will not be shamed and become incorrigible. A second observation is that Jesus does not lead the one who injured to the one who was injured, but vice versa, since the one who did the injustice would probably be too ashamed to approach the other.³³

Paulus Winfridus - 3 step approach

This eighth century father also finds in Matt. 18:15-17 a call to forgive the sinning brother, but seems to make forgiveness conditional upon the sinner's repentance and request for forgiveness.³⁴

Paulus limits the application of this text when he includes and emphasizes $\epsilon\lambda\varsigma\ \sigma\epsilon\acute{\iota}$ in v. 15. If someone sins against God and not against a disciple, then this is a matter for God alone to forgive and not one for the disciple to judge.³⁵

At first the sinning brother is to be rebuked privately, lest he be shamed and continue in his sin. If he doesn't listen to the one, then one or two more join the first, with the hope that the delinquent brother will be convinced by their testimony. If he still does not listen to the two or three, then the church is to be told, with the hope that he will listen to the reproaches of many.³⁶

³³"Scholia Vetera in Matthaeum," Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca, edited by J. P. Migne (Paris: J. P. Migne, 1863), CVI, 1135-1136. Hereafter Migne's Greek edition will be referred to as MPG.

³⁴Paulus Winfridus Diaconus, "Homilia XCII," Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina, edited by J. P. Migne (Paris: J. P. Migne, 1861), XCV, 1265. Hereafter Migne's Latin edition will be referred to as MPL.

³⁵Ibid., col. 1264.

³⁶Ibid.

If the sinner still does not repent, then he is to be regarded as a Gentile and a tax collector. The Gentile, according to Paulus, is one who is not reborn in Christ. The tax collector is one who sins on the public account, or who does public business through frauds, thefts, and wicked perjuries. The incorrigible brother is classified with Gentiles and tax collectors in order to show him the seriousness of his sin.³⁷

Photius

Photius comments only briefly on Matt. 18:15. He notes that in the preceding section Jesus was speaking of those who scandalize the neighbor, and here turns to those who are scandalized. The Savior tells the latter not to consider the injustice done to them, but to work to convert the situation for great gain. This happens when the person wronged privately reproves the one who wronged him. If he repents, great gain comes to both--the person wronged becomes reconciled to the other, and that one obtains forgiveness, being set free of the sin.³⁸

Thus this ninth century father also emphasizes unselfish concern for the offender, and readiness to forgive him on the part of the person offended.

Haymo

Haymo claims that Matt. 18:15 was addressed to Simon Peter. He

³⁷Ibid., cols. 1264-1265.

³⁸"Fragmenta in Matthaëum," MPG, CI, 1205-1208.

understands (this section (vv. 15-22) as a call to forgive the brother who sins against us.) The brother is one who is able to say with us, "Our Father who art in heaven." Haymo follows Paulus Winfridus in distinguishing between sinning against a brother, in which case the latter is to forgive, and sinning against God, in which case we do nothing about it--it's a matter for God. The purpose for the private rebuke is the danger that a public rebuke may drive the sinner further away. This father also points out the gain for both parties involved.³⁹

In his comments on v. 17 Haymo defines the church as "the congregation of faithful ones" (congregatio fidelium). Somehow he finds in the second half of this verse the "clear teaching" that those who under the name of faithful ones secretly do the works of unfaithful ones are more evil than those who are manifestly unfaithful.⁴⁰

Theophylactus - 354

Taking note of the fact that Jesus is talking about a brother in v. 15, Theophylactus instructs that if an unbeliever sins against a believer, the latter should not rebuke him, but rather avoid him, even if he is a relative.⁴¹ A brother is to be reproved first privately, then by two or three. If he still does not listen,

then make public the error to the leaders of the church. For since he did not hear two or three, . . . let him be chastened by the church after that. And if he does not hear her, then let

³⁹MPL, CXVIII, 266-267.

⁴⁰Ibid., col. 267.

⁴¹MPG, CXXIII, 341-344.

him be thrown away, in order that he might not give a share of his own evils to others also.⁴²

Theophylactus points out that, according to v. 17, it is the one wronged who is to consider the one who did wrong a tax collector and Gentile, that is, a sinner and unbeliever.⁴³

Euthymius Zigabenus - 3 step

Since the scandalizer would not easily come and confess his sin to the one scandalized, this twelfth century father observes, Jesus sends the latter to the former. The one scandalized should reprove the scandalizer, but

in a brotherly way and correctively, and not inimically. . . . And in order that the reproof might be well-received, he urges that this take place between the two alone, lest being made public he become more hasty and harder to set right.⁴⁴

If the rebuke of one is too weak to cure, then one or two more are to be taken along to assist the first brother. The one or two will also be witnesses both of the offended one's kindness and of the offender's hardness.⁴⁵

According to Euthymius Zigabenus, Jesus used the term "church" to mean the "leading men of the church" (v. 17). These leaders are then to speak to the offender about his sin, with the hope that their prominence will help to lead him to repentance. If these fail, then let him be to you as one who has nothing in common with you, as one who

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴MPG, CXXIX, 504-505.

⁴⁵Ibid., col. 505.

is incurable. This means banishment and expulsion from the church. The purpose is always that the sinning brother be set straight; if he repents, he is to be received back into fellowship.⁴⁶

Summary

None of these fathers comments on all the points of Matt. 18:15-17, and some make only brief reference to this passage. On the basis of what has been reported in this chapter, several observations can be made.

The majority of the fathers recognized Jesus' call for a loving and forgiving attitude toward the sinning brother. Of those who comment on each of the three verses, all find a three-step procedure to be followed. Most of them understand v. 17b as a reference to excommunication from the church. However, Origen, Theophylactus and apparently also Augustine, interpret this verse as a directive to the individual disciple who first rebuked the sinner privately. Origen is the only one who specifically points out that this passage does not say what the church should do if the offender does not listen to it.

According to the fathers who discuss it, the role of the one or two others (v. 16) is to join the first in reproving the sinning brother and in seeking his repentance and continued fellowship. Euthymius Zigabenus mentions this, and also assigns to the one or two the role of witnesses to the first one's kind rebuke and the sinner's refusal to listen.

⁴⁶Ibid.

Haymo describes the church as a group of people. The others who explain this term understand it as a reference to the leader-pastors.

Finally, this writer selected at random eleven references listed under "Index de Censuris Ecclesiasticis" in the index to MPL.⁴⁷ In none of these was Matt. 18:15-17 mentioned.

⁴⁷MPL, CCXIX, 1355-1364.

CHAPTER V

MATTHEW 18:15-17 DURING AND SINCE THE REFORMATION

Luther

In a sermon on Matt. 18:15-17 Luther refers to the rebuke of v. 15 as personal, private admonition, overflowing with love and concern for the erring one.¹ In his discussions of the Eighth Commandment in the Large Catechism he uses Matt. 18:15-17 to teach the correct use of the tongue in regard to a neighbor who does wrong: don't talk to others about it, but speak to him in loving concern. Luther frequently emphasizes this seeking love for the straying brother, and the readiness to forgive him. Any rebuke that is given must be motivated by love. Thus Luther certainly did grasp Jesus' main point in this text, as noted from the context in Chapter II.

According to Luther, the role of the one or two others (v. 16) is that of witnessing that the first disciple has indeed admonished the sinning brother.² In other places Luther says that the one or two are taken along also to assist in giving admonition.

Generally speaking, Luther understood the term "church" (v. 17a) as the local congregation, and he interpreted v. 17b as a reference to excommunication.

¹"Luthers Predigt ueber Matth. 18:15-18," Saemmtliche Schriften, edited by Joh. Georg Walch (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1891), VII, 920. Hereafter this edition of Luther's writings will be referred to as St. L. Ed.

²Ibid.

In the Large Catechism (Eighth Commandment) Luther gives instructions that, if the erring brother does not listen to the two or three, the matter should then be brought before the public, before either the civil or the ecclesiastical court. However, the Reformer usually interprets the phrase, "tell it to the church" (v. 17), as somehow involving the whole congregation. In his sermon on Reminiscere Sunday, 1522, he gives these directions: If a person will not listen to your private admonition, nor to the admonition of two or three,

you should tell the pastor before the whole congregation, have your witnesses with you, and accuse him before the pastor in the presence of the people. . . . Then, if he will not give up and willingly acknowledge his guilt, the pastor should exclude him and put him under the ban before the whole assembly, for the sake of the congregation, until he comes to himself and is received back again.³

In the sermon on Matt. 18:15-17 referred to above, Luther explains v. 17 in this way: the offender must be named before the whole congregation; tell what he has done, and that he listens to no one. Everyone should then condemn this vice and speak the judgment.⁴ Another time Luther wrote that according to Matt. 18:17 the whole Christian congregation has the authority to ban, and should take part in every ban; no one person--the bishop or an official or anyone else--can pronounce the ban alone.⁵

In these and other references Luther repeatedly interprets v. 17b as a call for excommunication of the impenitent sinner who refuses to

³Martin Luther, "Sermons, I," Luther's Works, edited and translated by John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 51, 97-98.

⁴St. L. Ed., VII, 920.

⁵Ibid., XIX, 951-952.

listen to the admonition made in the presence of the congregation. The excommunicated person is to be regarded as a pagan. In his commentary on Matt. 7:6 Luther quotes v. 17b, then continues, "In other words, you tell them that they are not Christians but damned heathen."⁶ In a 1523 letter to the people of Prague, Luther declares that the phrase, "Let him be to you as a Gentile," means, "to have nothing to do with him, to have no fellowship with him. This truly is to excommunicate, to bind, and to close the door of heaven."⁷

In summary, Luther interpreted Matt. 18:15-17 as a three-step procedure to be used in admonishing erring brothers. Verse 17b speaks of church excommunication. The motivation for both the admonitions and the excommunication is love--genuine concern for that person's salvation.

The Lutheran Confessions

Besides Luther's reference to Matt. 18:15-17 in the Large Catechism (Eighth Commandment), where he uses it as a description of the correct way to talk about the brother's sin, the Lutheran Confessions contain only one reference to this text. This appears in Veit Dietrich's German version of the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, and is not found in Melanchthon's original Latin version.

In discussing the matter of who has the power of the keys, this statement appears in the German version of the Treatise: "Likewise

⁶Martin Luther, "The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat," Luther's Works, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 21, 226.

⁷Martin Luther, "Church and Ministry, II," Luther's Works, edited by Conrad Bergendoff (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 40, 27.

Christ gives the supreme and final jurisdiction to the church when he says, 'Tell it to the church'" (18:17).⁸

Calvin

Calvin recognized in Matt. 18:15-17 Jesus' teaching that His disciples are to forgive one another, but to do so in such a manner as to endeavor to correct their faults.⁹ He understands this text as a call for a three-step procedure. Referring to these verses, Calvin writes, "Now he [Jesus] distinctly lays down three steps of brotherly correction."¹⁰ He also sets forth this interpretation in the chapter on church discipline in his Institutes.¹¹ This procedure is to be used in the case of private sins; for public sins, 1 Tim. 5:20 applies.¹²

Commenting on v. 16 Calvin asserts that if the sinner explicitly denies the accusation when privately admonished, then the one or two witnesses would be useless, for in that case the offender has shut the door against a second admonition. In other words, the second step would not be used in such a case. When this step is taken, the purpose of the witnesses is to give greater weight and impressiveness to the admonition. Calvin notes that this is not the same purpose which

⁸The Book of Concord, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 324, n. 3.

⁹John Calvin, Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, translated by William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), II, 352.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, translated by John Allen (New Haven: Hezekiah Howe, 1816), III, book IV, 244-249.

¹²Ibid., pp. 246-247.

the witnesses had in Deut. 19:15, where the purpose of the witnesses was to establish a fact.¹³

Calvin understood Ἐκκλησία in v. 17 as a reference to the Jewish synagogue. Jesus did not mean the church, since it did not exist yet. "Tell the Ἐκκλησία" means, according to Calvin, to tell the assembly of elders, those who govern the church and who have the power of excommunication. Verse 17b then speaks of excommunication.¹⁴

Continuing our survey of the history of the church's interpretation of Matt. 18:15-17, we now enter the period from the Reformation to the present time. Here we shall examine the treatment of Matt. 18:15-17 by thirty-one interpreters, ranging from Abraham Calov of seventeenth century Lutheran orthodoxy to Krister Stendahl and others on the current scene. This is exclusive of interpreters within The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, who shall be considered in the following chapter. Those treated in this chapter are not all mentioned here by name, but are listed in the bibliography.

We shall ask these interpreters four questions: (1) Are we here given a specific three-step procedure for dealing with a sinning brother? (2) Does this text speak only of personal relationships among Christians, or also of ecclesiastical discipline? (3) Who is the Ἐκκλησία? (4) Does v. 17b describe ecclesiastical excommunication?

In regard to the first question there is practically universal agreement on the answer, "Yes." As noted in Chapter I, opinions vary as to whether this is an authentic logion of Jesus or the formulation

¹³Harmony, pp. 354-355.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 356-358; Institutes, p. 246.

of the later church. There are also slightly varying viewpoints on the circumstances in which this text is to be applied. But all the interpreters of this period whose works were checked interpreted Matt. 18:15-17 as a progressive three-step (some more accurately call it four steps) procedure. Most noted correctly the motivation of seeking, forgiving love, and thus treated this text evangelically. Few used the term, "three-step procedure," or a similar one. But all, either directly or by implication, explained these verses as progressive stages of admonition and/or discipline. None stated anything to the contrary, or even questioned this point.

There is less agreement on the second question. Some of the interpreters do not indicate clearly where they stand on this matter. However, the large majority of them find reference to ecclesiastical discipline in Matt. 18:15-17. The extremes of the two views are expressed by Calov, who found here the explicit institution of ecclesiastical discipline and excommunication,¹⁵ and by Alexander B. Bruce, who flatly declares, "There is no reference in this passage to ecclesiastical discipline and Church censures."¹⁶ Bruce is joined in this view by Philip Wendell Crannell, who states, "It is doubtful whether an express prescription of excommunication is found in Our Lord's words (Mt. 18:15-19). The offence and the penalty also seem purely personal."¹⁷

¹⁵Abraham Calovius, Biblia Novi Testamenti Illustrata (Dresdae et Lipsiae: J. C. Zimmermann, 1719), III, 346-348.

¹⁶Alexander Balmain Bruce, "The Synoptic Gospels," The Expositor's Greek Testament, edited by W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1961), I, 240.

¹⁷Philip Wendell Crannell, "Excommunication," The International

Theodor Zahn also understands this text as referring to personal relationships, although he assumes that the disciple does not regard the offender as a Gentile and a tax collector until the congregation has so judged.¹⁸

T. W. Manson, Rudolf Bultmann, Krister Stendahl, and Gerhard Barth are among those men who ascribe Matt. 18:15-17 to a later date and who view this text as a description of church disciplinary procedure in use at the time of writing.

Proceeding to the third question, we ask, "Who is the ekklēsia (ἐκκλησία)?" The common denominator of the answers of most interpreters is some sort of group of disciples among whom both the offender and his admonisher are numbered. Some see this as the organized local congregation, and others as simply the group of believers in that place. A few understand ekklēsia here as a reference to the Jewish local community.

Calov polemicizes against Rome and emphasizes that ekklēsia is neither the pope nor the congregation of prelates, but the assembly of believers.¹⁹ H. A. W. Meyer describes ekklēsia as "the community of believers on Jesus." There is no allusion in Matt. 18:17 to individual congregations, since none yet existed. Meyer goes on to say that under later circumstances, the ekklēsia here could be a representative body

Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, edited by James Orr et al. (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), II, 1050.

¹⁸Theodor Zahn, Kommentar Zum Neuen Testament (4. Auflage; Leipzig and Erlangen: A. Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung Dr. Werner Scholl, 1922), I, 581.

¹⁹Calovius, p. 347.

chosen for the purpose of maintaining discipline, but it is still basically the group of believers.²⁰

Bruce calls the ekklēsia "the brotherhood of believers in the Christ."²¹ According to M'Neile, ekklēsia denotes "the small body of the Lord's followers as distinct from the Jewish Church," if this is a genuine utterance of Jesus. But if it is not, ekklēsia "probably means the local body of Christians in a town or district."²² For Zahn, Schmid, and Schniewind, ekklēsia is the local congregation (die Gemeinde), while Montefiore refers it to "the mother congregation of Jerusalem."²³

On the other hand, Hort insists that in Matt. 18:17 ekklēsia has to mean the Jewish community, apparently the Jewish local community.²⁴ Plummer also feels compelled to explain ekklēsia as originally used in Matt. 18:17 as a reference to the Jewish assembly, but goes on to say that this section can be applied to the Christian community. Referring to ekklēsia, he writes:

probably the local assembly, the elders and congregation of the synagogue in the place where the parties live. . . . The directions here given are applicable to the Christian community.

²⁰Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Gospel of Matthew, translated by Peter Christie; translation revised and edited by Frederick Crombie and William Stewart (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1884), pp. 329-330.

²¹p. 240.

²²Alan Hugh M'Neile, The Gospel According to St. Matthew (London: Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1915), p. 266.

²³C. G. Montefiore, The Synoptic Gospels (London: Macmillan and Company, 1927), II, 252.

²⁴Fenton John Anthony Hort, The Christian Ecclesia: A Course of Lectures on the Early History and Early Conceptions of Ecclesia and Four Sermons (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1900), pp. 9-10.

but, at the time, they must have been spoken of a community of Jews.²⁵

The majority of interpreters answer the fourth question ("Does v. 17b describe ecclesiastical excommunication?") affirmatively. As might be expected, all those who understand Matt. 18:15-17 as directions for church discipline (the second question above) also understand v. 17b as a call for excommunication from the church.

Meyer is one who dissents from this view. Referring to Matt. 18:17b, he declares, "In this passage Christ says nothing, as yet, about formal excommunication on the part of the church (1 Cor. 5); but the latter was such a fair and necessary deduction. . . ." ²⁶ J. C. Lambert similarly states, "it would be a mistake to find in this passage any references to a formal process of excommunication on the part of the church." The offender excommunicates himself by his attitude, Lambert explains, and so is regarded as an outsider by community members.²⁷ Crannell was quoted above as doubting any direct reference to excommunication here. He further suggests that in v. 17b Jesus is laying down the principle of "dignified personal avoidance" of the obstinate offender, rather than a prescription for ecclesiastical action.²⁸

According to Zahn, v. 17b directs the disciple who first rebuked the sinning brother to regard the latter in his persistent impenitence

²⁵Alfred Plummer, An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew (London: Elliot Stock, 1909), p. 253.

²⁶p. 330.

²⁷J. C. Lambert, "Excommunication," A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels, edited by James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), I, 559-560.

²⁸Pp. 1050-1051.

just as the Israelite regarded the Gentile and the tax collector, namely, as one who does not belong to the Gemeinde (but only after the Gemeinde has so judged).²⁹ William Barclay asserts that v. 17b does not speak of excommunication, but is a challenge to seek and to win even the very stubborn.³⁰

Krister Stendahl is among the majority who interpret Matt. 18:17b as a description of excommunication. He paraphrases this clause simply when he says, "he has to go." The offender is out of the communal relationship, "transferred back into the sinful world."³¹ Filson agrees with this view: v. 17 "directs the church to exclude the unrepentant sinner."³² Bonhoeffer, Schmid, and others also number in this group.

Summarizing the church's interpretation of Matt. 18:15-17 during the past four hundred years, we note that this text is generally understood as a description of a three-step church disciplinary procedure, carried out within the framework of a local congregation, and culminating in excommunication from the church.

²⁹p. 581.

³⁰William Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), II, 208-209.

³¹Krister Stendahl, "Prayer and Forgiveness," Svensk Exegetisk Arsbok, XXII-XXIII (1957-1958), p. 79.

³²Floyd V. Filson, A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), p. 202.

CHAPTER VI

THE INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 18:15-17 IN THE LUTHERAN CHURCH--MISSOURI SYNOD

The four questions asked of the interpreters in the preceding chapter will now be asked of writers within The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod.

First, are we here given a specific three-step procedure for dealing with a sinning brother?

Wilhelm Sihler's treatment of this passage in an 1856 article indicates an affirmative answer.¹ Walther agrees, but adds that it is not necessary to follow the steps of Matt. 18 if the sin is open and known to the whole congregation.² In a Northern District convention essay in 1875, F. A. Ahner states that in Matt. 18:15-18 it is given and prescribed by Christ exactly how the church must proceed in exercising discipline.³ Seventy years later a writer in a Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod journal discusses Matt. 18:15-17 and asserts, "God has established detailed procedure for brotherly love in action."⁴ In a

¹[Dr. Sihler], "Wie werden wahrhaft lutherische Gemeinden gegründet und erzogen?", Lehre und Wehre, II (November 1856), 333.

²C. F. W. Walther, Americanisch-Lutherische Pastoraltheologie (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1906), p. 325.

³F. A. Ahner, "Thesen ueber die noethige Vorsicht und Gewissenhaftigkeit im Bannverfahren," Verhandlungen der einundzwanzigsten Jahresversammlung des Noerdlichen Districts der deutschen evang.-luth. Synode von Missouri, Ohio u. a. Staaten (St. Louis: Druckerei der Synode von Missouri, Ohio und andere Staaten, 1875), p. 39.

⁴H. O. A. Keinath (Sermon outline), Concordia Theological Monthly, XVI (July 1945), 475. Hereafter this journal will be referred to as CTM.

similar vein W. H. Bouman states that Matt. 18:15-18 contains "the very carefully outlined rules and regulations of God."⁵ Bouman observes that the Lord is more explicit in giving detailed instructions here than anywhere else.⁶ The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod catechism quotes Matt. 18:15-17 as the explicit directions of Scripture in answer to the question, "What steps must be taken before a manifest and impenitent sinner is excluded from the congregation?"⁷

J. H. C. Fritz also indicates an affirmative answer to this first question when he speaks of "the various degrees of brotherly admonition as prescribed by Christ Himself, Matt. 18:15-17. Christ's established order should be carefully observed and adhered to. . . ."⁸ In an essay on church discipline, Edgar J. Otto uses such phrases as "precise commands,"⁹ and "explicit instructions,"¹⁰ in discussing Matt. 18:15-17. He sets forth this thesis, among others: "The procedure employed in a disciplinary action must conform to the instructions of our Lord set forth in Matthew 18."¹¹

⁵Walter H. Bouman, "The Practical Application of Matthew 18:15-18," CTM, XVIII, III (March 1947), 178.

⁶Ibid., pp. 186-187.

⁷A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1943), p. 186.

⁸John H. C. Fritz, Pastoral Theology (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1945), p. 229.

⁹Edgar J. Otto, "Church Discipline," The Abiding Word, edited by Theodore Laetsch (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), II, 539.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 542.

¹¹Ibid., p. 548.

The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod writers thus far answer our first question with a clear-cut "Yes." However, in recent years three others have departed in progressively greater degrees from this traditional view. H. J. A. Bouman suggests that Matt. 18:15-17 teaches basic principles more than precise methods. After explaining this text as a three-step procedure, Bouman qualifies it when he says,

Of course, not every deviation that may confront us will be precisely like the one described in Matt. 18. Hence the externals of our treatment may vary. But we are concerned with objectives and attitudes, and these should be constant.¹²

Franzmann finds in this text three progressive steps, but then emphasizes the motivation of love and concern for the erring brother.

He writes as follows:

The "three steps" prescribed by Jesus are anything but legal prescription and casuistry. . . . These are merely the clear-cut expression of Jesus' will for the fellowship of His disciples, the will, namely, that no sinner shall be needlessly degraded, that no sinner's fate shall be committed to the subjectivity of any one man but shall be the concern of the collective love and sobriety of the whole church. . . .¹³

Finally, Coiner explicitly declares,

the framework of the entire chapter leads to the thesis that Matt. 18:15-17 does not intend to give concrete and specific directions regarding church disciplinary procedure as such. The pericope rather shows how a brother should leave nothing untried in order to lead a sinning brother to repentance and faith and so bring him again to the kingdom of God to which he would be lost as a consequence of his unrepented sin.¹⁴

¹²Herbert J. A. Bouman, "Biblical Presuppositions for Church Discipline," CTM, XXX (July 1959), 513.

¹³Martin H. Franzmann, Follow Me: Discipleship According to St. Matthew (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 153.

¹⁴Harry G. Coiner, "Living Toward One Another with the Word of God," CTM, XXXVI (October 1965), 625-626.

Yet Coiner finds here a general three-step procedure which the brother will use in his efforts to regain the erring one.

Second, does this text speak only of personal relationships among Christians, or also of ecclesiastical discipline?

Many of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod quotations cited in answer to the first question also answer this one, indicating the interpretation of Matt. 18:15-17 as a reference to ecclesiastical discipline. In addition to the comment quoted earlier, Ahner boldly asserts, "This passage proves undeniably that church discipline should be administered in every Christian congregation."¹⁵ Francis Pieper writes that the practice of church discipline is a function with which the church is charged in Matt. 18:17, and that this verse enjoins the whole congregation to exercise Christian discipline.¹⁶

All other Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod interpreters also understand this text as speaking of church discipline, with the lone exception of Coiner, who finds reference only to personal relationships among Christians. He states that,

the pericope does not teach a method of church discipline leading to excommunication by action of the church, but the whole thrust is individual care of the brother and how that responsibility should be carried out.¹⁷

Third, who is the ekklēsia?

Again there is nearly complete agreement among Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod writers, who understand ekklēsia in v. 17 as the local

¹⁵Ahner, p. 19.

¹⁶Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), III, 420-421.

¹⁷Coiner, p. 626.

congregation. An 1866 synodical convention was told that the ekklēsia in Matt. 18:17 is not the congregation of saints in the whole world, but clearly the local congregation.¹⁸ G. Mahler states that the voters' assembly acts in the name of the whole congregation in carrying out Christian discipline according to Matt. 18.¹⁹ On the other hand, Otto declares that the ekklēsia is the "entire membership" of the local congregation.²⁰

Coiner understands ekklēsia as the local congregation "to which the parties concerned belong."²¹ He further suggests that the phrase, "tell it to the church," means that

the leaders of the church, the constituted body with authority given by the whole church, should be alerted to the fact that a brother refused to hear the Gospel. . . .²²

Fourth, does Matt. 18:17b describe ecclesiastical excommunication?

Of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod writers who comment sufficiently to indicate how they would answer this question, nearly all agree that Matt. 18:17b does describe ecclesiastical excommunication.

Coiner again takes exception to this general view.

According to Walther, Matt. 18:17 teaches that the power to

¹⁸The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, Zwoelfter und Dreizehnter Synodal-Bericht der Allgemeinen Deutschen Evang.-Luth. Synode von Missouri, Ohio u. a. Staaten vom Jahre 1864 u. 1866 (St. Louis: Aug. Wiebusch u. Sohn, 1867), pp. 71-72.

¹⁹G. Mahler, "Discipline in the Ancient Synagog and Matt. 18," CTM, IV (June 1933), 412.

²⁰Otto, p. 550.

²¹Coiner, p. 629.

²²Ibid., p. 630.

excommunicate is the power of the whole congregation.²³ H. J. A. Bouman understands v. 17b as "the shock treatment of expulsion from the church as one bound by God in heaven for his impenitence in faith (heathen man) or life (publican)."²⁴ C. August Hardt also finds excommunication here, and explains this verse as a call for the termination of the fraternal relationship and of religious fellowship.²⁵ J. H. C. Fritz interprets v. 17b as a prescription for excommunication by the church, and further explains the verse as directing the members of the church to avoid "any intercourse or familiarity with an excommunicated person which might give the impression that such a person is still considered a Christian."²⁶

Coiner is apparently the first Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod writer to answer "No" to this fourth question. He declares that

it is untenable to read excommunication, as the term is conventionally understood, into any of the statements of this passage, and that it is therefore doubtful if an express or explicit prescription of excommunication or ecclesiastical action is found in this passage.²⁷

Coiner takes note of the singular $\tau\omicron\lambda\iota$ in Matt. 18:17b, and therefore understands this verse as speaking to the individual disciple who first became involved with his sinning brother. This passage, according to

²³Walther, p. 348.

²⁴Bouman, p. 513.

²⁵C. August Hardt, "Christian Fellowship," CTM, XVI (August 1945), 516.

²⁶John H. C. Fritz, Pastoral Theology (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1945), p. 239.

²⁷Coiner, p. 626.

exegetical
reasons

Coiner, does not state what the church does. "One may conclude that if the man is as a Gentile and a tax collector to the individual, he is also that to the church," but this text does not affirm this.²⁸

With a large degree of unanimity, The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod interpreters point out the motivation of love in carrying out the fraternal admonition and/or church discipline commanded in Matt. 18:15-17. But most of them emphasize the procedure and the necessity of following it exactly, to the extent that the basic concern of the text is all but lost in a forest of procedural details. As a result, this passage is treated and used more legalistically than evangelically. H. J. A. Bouman, Franzmann, and Coiner, however, do succeed in emphasizing attitude and motivation over method, and their evangelical viewpoint is reflected throughout their writings on this text.

²⁸Ibid., p. 631.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSIONS: AN INTERPRETATION OF MATT. 18:15-17

Having examined the context of Matt. 18:15-17 (Chapter II), the possible Jewish background and parallels (Chapter III), and the history of the church's interpretation of this text (Chapters IV-VI), we now proceed to a closer examination of the text itself.

Verse 15

Concerning matters of textual criticism, we note that the words **ΕΙΣ ΟΕ** are included in the manuscripts of the Byzantine family, in Bezae and Koridethi, and in some other witnesses, as well as in the Vulgate and some of the Old Latin manuscripts, and in most Syrian versions. However, the phrase is not found in Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, in the Sahidic and Thebaic translations, nor in Cyril, Origen, and Basil.

(The weight of the evidence of these documents seems to be against the inclusion of **ΕΙΣ ΟΕ** in the text.) Furthermore, it is more likely that this phrase would have been inserted than eliminated. The emphasis on a private rebuke, or possibly Peter's **ΕΙΣ ΕΜΕ** in v. 21, might have prompted a copyist to make such an interpolation. The parallel passage, Luke 17:3 ("If your brother sins, rebuke him"), also warrants against the inclusion of **ΕΙΣ ΟΕ**.

Still another factor which indicates that these words are a later addition is the relationship of v. 15 to the preceding context. In the light of vv. 12-14, Jesus is saying in v. 15 that if your fellow sheep, a brother, goes astray from God's flock, go find him and try to bring

him back. Whether the sin is $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma\ \tau\acute{\epsilon}$ or not doesn't make any significant difference. As H. J. A. Bouman observes, the absence of $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma\ \tau\acute{\epsilon}$ makes the case even stronger. The disciple cannot be indifferent to a brother's sin; even though it is not directed at him, the brother's sin is the disciple's concern.¹

(However, in actual practice this text will probably be most often applied by the one against whom the sin was directed, since in many cases he alone will know about it, and since he is the one who will want to make clear his readiness to forgive. Furthermore, he is in the best position to speak and demonstrate God's Word of forgiveness to the sinning brother.)

The word $\epsilon\acute{\mu}\alpha\rho\tau\acute{\iota}\nu\omega$ was used in a secular as well as a religious sense. This is also true of the Hebrew שָׁלַט , which is usually translated with $\epsilon\acute{\mu}\alpha\rho\tau\acute{\iota}\nu\omega$ in the LXX. Both words have the basic meaning, "to miss." $\epsilon\acute{\mu}\alpha\rho\tau\acute{\iota}\nu\omega$ is found in the concrete sense from the time of Homer; it is also used metaphorically in Homeric Greek, especially in the sense of intellectual shortcoming.² Already in Homer it denotes erroneous action, and there is also the beginning of moral evaluation in the sense of doing wrong. Beyond its basic meaning, "to miss," שָׁלַט is used in the Old Testament in the metaphorical sense of "going astray" (for example, Prov. 19:2) and "not finding"

¹"Biblical Presuppositions for Church Discipline," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXX (July 1959), 512.

²" $\epsilon\acute{\mu}\alpha\rho\tau\acute{\iota}\nu\omega$," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, edited by Gerhard Kittel, translated and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids and London: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), I, 293. Hereafter this edition will be referred to as TDNT.

(for example, Prov. 8:36). However, the predominant use of $\epsilon\lambda\theta\epsilon\tau\alpha$ is in the religious sense of deviation from a required norm. The Septuagint's use of $\epsilon\mu\alpha\rho\tau\acute{\iota}\nu\omega$ for $\epsilon\lambda\theta\epsilon\tau\alpha$ resulted in the former having the same predominantly religious sense as the latter.³

$\epsilon\mu\alpha\rho\tau\acute{\iota}\nu\omega$ appears in the Synoptic Gospels seven times, all in this religious sense. Its use here in Matt. 18:15 is particularly appropriate in view of its metaphorical sense of going astray and Jesus' mention of the sheep going astray in v. 12. The brother goes astray when he deviates from the norm established by the Father for the disciples of His Son.

In the Synoptics $\epsilon\mu\alpha\rho\tau\acute{\iota}\alpha$ is always understood as an individual act, and $\epsilon\mu\alpha\rho\tau\acute{\iota}\nu\omega$ always appears in the aorist tense, except in Matt. 18:21, where the future is used. Here in v. 15 the aorist indicates a specific act of sinning. However, Jesus is not speaking of any and every sinful act, but, as Harry G. Coiner observes, "The context supplies the directive that the sin is of such nature that it cannot be permitted to pass as a weakness and fault such as we all commit."⁴ The sin is of such nature that there is danger of losing the sinner as a brother.

Rather than referring to a specific sin, the aorist might also indicate the specific point at which a brother turned aside and went astray. In this case it would not be a specific sin but a general pattern of living that would arouse the disciple's loving concern for

³Ibid., pp. 267-302.

⁴"Living Toward One Another with the Word of God," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXXVI (October 1965), 626, n. 33.

the straying brother and prompt him to seek his return. Any attempt to limit the application of this text to specific sins is out of harmony with the text's basic concern, namely, the welfare of the brother.

(The question is not, "When am I required to go and correct a brother?," but rather, "Is my brother in danger and thus in need of me?") It may be a specific sin, or it may be persistence in an unchristian life; it may or may not be a sin directly against the disciple; but whenever the disciple sees a brother straying away from the Good Shepherd, he is concerned and moves to restore the sinner as a brother.

The conjunction $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu$ with the aorist subjunctive indicates general conditions or refers to something impending.⁵ Here in Matt. 18:15 Jesus probably speaks of an impending situation. He knew that this would happen, and that it would happen soon, and the disciples were to start practicing this concerned seeking immediately. We might think here of Judas and other disciples who went astray already during this time of Jesus' public ministry (John 6:66-71).

The term "brother" was used in Judaism as a designation of a coreligionist, and is similarly used in the New Testament to designate one as a "fellow Christian." Basil F. C. Atkinson suggests that the term should be extended to include anyone else,⁶ but such an extension would be contrary to the wide use of the word in both Judaism and the

⁵F. Blass and A. Debrunner, A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, translated and revised by Robert W. Funk (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), section 373, p. 190.

⁶"The Gospel According to Matthew," The New Bible Commentary, edited by F. Davidson et al. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954), pp. 794-795.

New Testament, and also to the sense of this text. Coiner seems to suggest a narrowing of the application of the term when he writes, "The word 'brother' implies one with whom one has had a meaningful experience of *κοινωνία*."⁷ More accurately, the word "brother" denotes a person with whom one has in common the relationship of a child to the Father, through His Son Jesus Christ. However, in the practical application of Matt. 18:15, the implication probably holds true. Most likely such a rebuke would neither be given nor be effective without a prior meaningful experience of *κοινωνία*.

(The imperative *ὑπάγε*, which basically means "go away," "withdraw," tends more and more to mean simply "go" in the colloquial speech of New Testament times.⁸ This word reminds us that the disciple, like the shepherd, takes the initiative and goes to the straying brother.) Even if--and especially if--the sin has been against the disciple, he goes to the brother, for his concern is not that he has been hurt, but that his brother is in danger and needs the Word of God spoken to him.

The term *ἐλέγχω* is a key New Testament word in the Christian disciple's battle against separation-causing sin among the people of God. In classical Greek this word is used in various senses including "to scorn," "to shame," "to blame," "to expose," "to resist," "to interpret," "to investigate."⁹ In the New Testament the use of this

⁷P. 626, n. 31.

⁸Walter Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, translated and adapted from the German by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 844 (s.v. *ὑπάγω*).

⁹Friedrich Buechsel, "*ἐλέγχω*," TDNT, II, 473.

term is restricted. Here it usually means "to show someone his sin and to summon him to repentance," "to point away from sin to repentance."¹⁰ For the sake of brevity, we will hereafter use the word "correct" to translate ἐλέγχω in this sense.

Thus the aorist imperative ἐλέγξον in v. 15 implies that the disciple is to speak Law and Gospel to the sinning brother. The latter needs to be shown that what he has done is sin, an offense against the will of his Father. He needs to hear the summons to repent, to turn from this sin to God, who overcame sin through the Christ and who forgives sin and thus establishes and keeps people in fellowship with Himself and His Son. He needs to be reminded that his sin has been forgiven that he might no longer sin. He needs to be reminded, furthermore, that his sin is a great danger to himself, since sin causes separation from God and from God's people.

The erring brother is to be corrected "between you and him alone." Far from being a legalistic directive, this is a natural and inevitable expression of the motivating love which permeates this entire pericope. This love seeks the welfare of the brother, and thus also seeks to avoid hurting him in any way, for example, by exposing his sin to others.

The word ἀκούω as used here means "to listen to someone," "to follow someone," "to give heed to what one says." This usage parallels that in Matt. 17:5, where the voice from the cloud declares, "ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ ." In the present case, the brother "hears" when he accepts the disciple's correction, when he recognizes his sin and repents of it.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 474.

If the brother thus listens, God forgives his sin in Christ; that means the sin is no longer there to cause separation, and so fellowship is restored. Jesus puts it this way: "you have gained your brother." *κερδαίνω*, "to gain," is used literally in regard to earthly riches (Matt. 16:26; 25:16,17,20,22; James 4:13), and figuratively in regard to people (1 Cor. 9:19-22; 1 Pet. 3:1) and in regard to Christ (Phil. 3:8). This term on occasion also has the sense, "to spare oneself something," "to avoid something," since the avoidance of loss is gain (Acts 27:21).¹¹ The figurative usage has no precedent in Hellenistic language. The word does not appear at all in the LXX. David Daube finds the background of this figurative sense in rabbinic vocabulary, although other scholars consider it a genuine technical term of Missionsprache without any precedent before its use by Christians.¹² The literal and figurative sense of *κερδαίνω* symbolize two totally different sets of values. Jesus taught His disciples to forsake the one and to follow the other. Earlier He pointed out to them that there is really no profit in earthly riches (Matt. 16:26) and now He gives them an example of the kind of gain that is truly of great profit, namely, gaining a person as a brother and fellow disciple.

Verse 16

The variant readings in this verse are all minor. Vaticanus has a slightly different word order, and Bezae omits *μαρτύρων*, but

¹¹Bauer, p. 430.

¹²"*κερδαίνω* as a Missionary Term," Harvard Theological Review, XL (1947), 109.

neither of these variants has much support. There is better support, however, for the variant $\sigma\epsilon\lambda\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ in place of $\sigma\omicron\upsilon$. The evidence for these two is fairly even. The sense of the passage remains the same, regardless of which one accepts as most likely genuine.

If the sinning brother does not listen to the disciple, that is, if he does not recognize his sin and does not repent of it, then the disciple is to take one or two others along with him. The disciple's love does not permit him to give up on the sinning brother, but continues to seek him. Now the disciple enlists the aid of one or two other disciples who share his love and concern for the straying brother. The one or two others have also had a meaningful experience of $\kappa\omicron\iota\nu\omega\nu\iota\alpha$ with the brother and thus there is reason to hope that the latter will listen to them.

Jesus explains the purpose of such a step by adding, "that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses." The exact wording in Matthew is a slightly abbreviated quotation from the LXX reading of Deut. 19:15. As noted in chapters III and IV, the role of the two or three in Deut. 19 and in every other parallel in both Old and New Testaments was to provide evidence in substantiation of a public charge against a person.

However, here in Matt. 18:16 the role of the "one or two others" seems to be somewhat larger than that. Here they are to join the first disciple in correcting the brother, for the plural $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ in v. 17a indicates that the one or two others also speak to the erring brother. Furthermore, for Jesus to command the one or two to be taken along only to provide evidence for a later charge would be out of

harmony with the whole tenor of this eighteenth chapter and with the seeking love which must be motivating the disciple at every step taken to regain the brother. The one or two others might possibly serve this purpose later, but this is secondary, since at this point the disciple has no plans for a "third step." He is not following a procedural check-list, but is trying to gain a brother. If the one or two others later serve somewhere as substantiating witnesses, this is merely a by-product of their major task of correcting the brother.

Having said this, we still cannot escape the fact that Jesus explicitly states that the purpose of taking along one or two others is "that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses." Most interpreters have understood this to mean that the one or two others later confirm the word of the first disciple to the church. However, we are probably to understand this as meaning that the one or two others are to confirm the word of the first disciple to the sinning brother and to the first disciple himself (and only incidentally, if at all, to the church later). They confirm the correction to the erring brother, who might think that the first disciple's correction was the result of a wrong judgment, a warped opinion, or even prejudice; and they confirm it to the first disciple himself, who in his humility will acknowledge the possibility that he is wrong, especially after the brother rejects his correction.

Verse 17

The verb *παράκουω* literally means "to hear aside." In usage its meaning varies and must be determined from the context. It occurs in the sense of "to overhear," that is, to hear what is not intended

for one to hear. Mark 5:36 is an example of this usage (and is the only place where this verb occurs in the New Testament besides here in Matt. 18:17). It is also used in the sense of "to hear incorrectly." Finally, a third meaning of παρακούω is "not to be willing to hear," to refuse to listen to someone, to disobey.¹³

The third sense of παρακούω is the only one which fits the context here. The term is parallel to the μή ἀκούσῃ of v. 16, and means that the person does not accept the disciples' correction, that is, he does not admit his sin and does not heed the call to repentance.

The word ἐκκλησία was used in secular Greek to denote any public assembly of people which had been duly summoned together.¹⁴ The New Testament understanding of this word is determined by its use in the LXX, where it appears approximately eighty times--almost always for Σὺν. Thus the student of the LXX would understand ekklēsia as the community of Israel, the people of God, gathered together to hear the words of the Lord (for example, Deut. 4:10; 9:10). Similarly, ekklēsia in the New Testament refers to the community of the New Israel, the people of God. Ekklēsia is the whole body of those who belong to God through Jesus Christ (for example, Eph. 1:22), but most often it is the people of God gathered in a particular place (for example, 1 Cor. 1:2). In the latter case, the one ekklēsia is present in that

¹³Gerhard Kittel, "παρακούω," TDNT, I, 223.

¹⁴Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon (Eighth edition; New York: American Book Company, n.d.), s.v.; James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament (London: Hodder and Stoughton, Limited, 1952), s.v.

place.¹⁵ "It is truly present in its wholeness in every company of believers, however small."¹⁶ Richard R. Caemmerer views the ekklēsia similarly: "'The church which is at Corinth' is not a circumlocution for 'the Corinthian church,' but it means 'the one church of God as it functions in Corinth.'"¹⁷

In trying to understand ekklēsia in Matt. 18:17 and in Matt. 16:18 (the only other place the word occurs in the Gospels), Karl Ludwig Schmidt searches for the Aramaic word used by Jesus when He first spoke these words to His disciples. Schmidt decides that it is "highly probable that Jesus used the word k^enishta" which was used to some extent for both the Christian ekklēsia and the Jewish סוּבַרְבָּרָה.¹⁸ Referring to these two Greek words, Schmidt also claims that "both words have more or less the same meaning and often represent the Hebrew word gahal."¹⁹ Therefore he concludes that one should not make a sharp distinction between ekklēsia as the whole body of believers and ekklēsia as a localized group. In Matt. 18:17 ekklēsia should be understood as referring to the synagogue, the Old Testament congregation,²⁰ which represented the whole body of God's people.

¹⁵Cf. Karl Ludwig Schmidt, "The Church," Bible Key Words, from Gerhard Kittel's Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament, translated and edited by J. R. Coates (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), I, 5-23.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁷Richard R. Caemmerer and Erwin L. Lueker, Church and Ministry in Transition (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p. 23.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 53.

²⁰Ibid., p. 50.

Thus we conclude that in Matt. 18:17 ekklēsia is not to be simply equated with an organized local congregation. Rather it is to be understood as the one church of God in that place, a group of disciples in fellowship, who have experienced one another's fellowship, who gather together to hear the Word of God, and who have been speaking the Word to one another.

The phrase, Εἰπὸν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ ("tell the church"), is very general, and we must avoid narrowing it down too specifically. To say that it means to tell the pastor, or the leaders of an organized congregation, or the latter's representative body, is to say more than the text says. This may be done in some cases. But the point of the text seems to be that this matter is to be told to disciples who are in fellowship with the sinning brother, who love him, and who are deeply concerned about his spiritual welfare. Earlier the first disciple involved one or two other disciples, and now he involves a still larger circle of disciples. Jesus does not give explicit and detailed directions as to the manner and method of involving this larger group. "The witness, prayer, love, and fellowship of the church is enlisted in whatever form it can best be related to the situation."²¹

(What is to be told to the church? The words immediately preceding this phrase ("If he refuses to listen to them") suggest that the church is to be told that the sinning brother did not listen to the two or three when they showed him his sin and called him to repentance. To tell the church all about the brother's sin would be out

²¹Coiner, p. 629.

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of harmony with this whole pericope and its context, which calls for loving concern for the brother. The problem that chiefly concerns the disciples at this point is not the sin which prompted the original correction, but the sin of rejecting the correction and refusing to repent. This is the matter that is to be brought to the church's attention.

This text does not state what the church does after being told, but the following clause ("and if he refuses to listen even to the church") implies that the church in some way speaks to the brother and calls him to repentance. As Coiner observes,

just how the church gets busy with the Word of God for the sake of the brother is not indicated in the text. The church must decide what the best procedure might be in each individual case.²²

If the person also refuses to listen to the church, "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." The word ἔθνικός occurs three other times in the New Testament (Matt. 5:47; 6:7; 3 John 7), and once in the adverbial form (Gal. 2:14). It is not found in the vocabulary of the LXX, nor is it listed in Liddell-Scott. In later Greek the word means "national" or "foreign." In the New Testament times ἔθνικός meant "Gentile," that is, one who is not a Jew and who does not live under the Law.²³ All three occurrences of this word in Matthew are in discourses of Jesus, and the point in all three is that the Gentile is one who is not numbered among the people of God and is not a disciple of Jesus.

τελώνης appears twenty times in the New Testament, all in the

²²p. 631.

²³Karl Ludwig Schmidt, "ἔθνικός," TDNT, II, 372.

Synoptics. It is coupled with the terms "sinners" (ἁμαρτωλοί) or "harlots" (πόρναι) in ten of those occurrences.

In Palestine the Romans farmed out the collection of certain taxes to private contractors, who paid a specified sum for the right to collect taxes in a certain locality and then tried to make a profit on the transaction. These tax farmers employed Jewish underlings to do the actual collecting. These Jewish tax collectors (τελιῶναι) incurred the hate of their fellow Jews on several counts. First of all, the Jews strongly disliked the paying of taxes to the Romans; such taxes were considered as tribute to a foreign oppressor whose domination was greatly resented. Then also, the tax collectors were engaged in actual robbery, for the prevailing system of tax collection afforded them many opportunities to exercise greed and unfairness. The papyri often mention these tax collectors, frequently indicating their unethical practices. Furthermore, the tax collector had to maintain continual contact with Gentiles in the course of his work, and this rendered a Jewish tax collector ceremonially unclean. According to rabbinic sources, tax collectors and their families were disqualified from holding communal office, and also from giving testimony in a Jewish court. Thus the tax collectors as a class were flagrant offenders against morality, people who forsook God and the Law for the sake of monetary gain, and who were therefore regarded as outside the fellowship of the people of God.²⁴

²⁴Cf. B. J. Bamberger, "Tax Collector," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, edited by George Arthur Buttrick et al. (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 522; Bauer, p. 820; Moulton and Milligan (s.v.).

When Jesus instructs the disciple to let the sinner be to him as a Gentile and a tax collector, He is telling the disciple that such a person is no longer a brother. Since he clings to his sin and refuses to repent, his sin has caused a separation and he is no longer in fellowship with God and with His people. He is now to be regarded and treated as one who is outside the fellowship of disciples. He is not to be despised and avoided, for that would be out of harmony not only with this discourse of Jesus, but also with His whole teaching (confer Matt. 5:44). Rather, he is to be loved and sought; the disciple will seek to win him back for Christ. To use Coiner's term, he is to be regarded as "missionary material."²⁵

It is to be noted that all the second person verbs and pronouns in Matt. 18:15-17 are singular. Here in v. 17b we take particular note of the singular *σοι*. The phrase, "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector," is addressed to the individual disciple who first became involved with the sinning brother (v. 15). Jesus does not say here that the church is to regard the sinner as a Gentile and a tax collector, but that the disciple is so to regard him. What the church does at this point or how the church regards him is not stated in this text. Thus v. 17b does not describe ecclesiastical excommunication, as many interpreters claim (confer preceding chapters).

Summary

At the beginning of Chapter I, the purpose of this paper was stated

²⁵pp. 631-632.

as an attempt to determine two things: (1) whether or not our Lord here lays down an explicit method for dealing with the sinning brother, and (2) whether this particular section of Scripture speaks only of personal relationships among Christians, or also of formal ecclesiastical discipline and excommunication.

In regard to the second point, we have already indicated the conclusion that Matt. 18:15-17 speaks of fraternal admonition in personal relationships among the disciples of Jesus Christ. (There is a clear indication that the church may become involved ("tell the church"), and there is the implication that the church then does something in seeking to gain the brother ("if he refuses to listen even to the church"), but the thrust of this pericope is individual care of the brother. The text does not describe ecclesiastical discipline as such, and it contains nothing about ecclesiastical excommunication.)

In regard to the first point, we conclude that our Lord does not here lay down an explicit method for dealing with the sinning brother. Jesus rather gives a clear description of what must be His disciple's attitude toward a sinning brother--forgiving love, and what a disciple must do over against that brother--seek to gain him for Christ.

Nevertheless, finding some sort of sequence of steps here seems to be unavoidable. In Chapter I the observation was made that Jesus nowhere else commands an explicit procedure to be followed for all time by the disciple in his relationship to another in a certain given situation (p. 3), and He does not do so here either. But Matt. 18:15-17 is unique among all the sayings of Jesus. There is a sequence of steps here, although they cannot accurately be described as an "explicit procedure," or as a "precise method," or the like.

In 18:6-9 Jesus told the disciple to go to any length to avoid tempting a brother to separation-causing sin, and here in vv. 15-17 Jesus tells him to go to any length in seeking to keep or to regain the brother who sins. (Any valid interpretation of this text must emphasize the attitude (love) and the goal (to gain the brother) over the procedure.) The latter must give way to the former. The steps which Jesus here mentions seem to be a natural expression of that seeking love. But if in the disciple's Spirit-directed judgment, love could be better expressed in another way, then the disciple should follow that other way. Jesus does not give an explicit procedure to be followed, but says that the sinning brother is to be loved; that he is to be forgiven; that he is to be sought; that he is to be shown his sin; that he is to be called to repentance; that the Gospel of Christ is to be spoken to him; and that even if the brother rejects all your efforts and proves himself to be outside of the fellowship of God's people, you still love him, seek him, and so on.

Thus in Matt. 18:15-17 Jesus calls His disciples to love one another as He has loved them. H. J. A. Bouman aptly describes this love:

This love is a tough, inexorable quality that relentlessly pursues its goal, a love that is ready to spend and be spent, to sweat and sacrifice. . . . Paraphrasing Jacob's tenacious dictum, the Christian in his concern for his fellow sinner has the blessed stubbornness to say: "I will not let you go unless you come clean with your God."²⁶

²⁶p. 514.

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