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Principles of Discipline in Matthew 18:15-17

Part I: A Contextual Study

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The mere mention of church discipline evokes mixed feelings in the typical church member of today. On the one hand, he recognizes some need for it, because after all, the Bible teaches it. On the other hand, he has too many bad memories or heard too many stories of unloving acts of church discipline in the past, cases of authoritarian legalistic action by church leaders over issues that turned out to have no connection with spiritual life.¹

Unfortunately it often is the negative attitude that prevails in the average church member's mind. This attitude has led to the relaxation of discipline.

It is true that, historically, the church has sometimes erred in this matter of discipline, but today the problem is one of outright neglect. It would be difficult to show another area of Christian life which is more commonly ignored by the modern evangelical church than church discipline.²

The answer to bad church discipline is good church discipline, not neglect of church discipline. There must be a reform in the attitude of Christians leading to the recovery of biblical church discipline.

Reasons for the Decline of Church Discipline

In Matthew 18:15-17 Jesus prescribed principles to follow which appear to make Christians to some extent responsible for each other's behavior, and He included disciplinary procedures. The New Testament contains abundant evidence of the practice of discipline by the apostolic church (Acts 5:1-11; I Corinthians 5:1-5; II Corinthians 2:5-11; Galatians 2:11-14; 6:1; II Thessalonians 3:6-15). Since the time of the early church, discipline has been recognized as an essential practice and distinctive of true, biblical Christianity.³

Church discipline, applied strictly according to biblical guidelines, is a rare occurrence these days. Church discipline that takes sin seriously is almost extinct, and church morality is often tarnished. Why is church discipline so widely neglected? What has led to its decline? Three reasons seem to account for its decline: abuse, confusion, and failure to uphold the teaching of Jesus.

Abuse of Discipline

Harsh and misguided church discipline in the past has made many Christian leaders and older Christians back off from its practice.

From its earliest years the church has fluctuated between leniency and severity, alternating between malicious ingenuity in punishing offenders to irresponsibility in turning a blind eye to their sins.⁴ John McNeill writes:

St. Gregory...bishop of Neo-Caesarea in Pontus, about A.D. 260...indicates four grades or classes of penitents prior to their restoration to full communion. The "weepers" or "mourners" stand outside the door of the church, beseeching the faithful to intercede for them; the "hearers" are placed in the narthex (a passage between the door and the nave); the "kneelers" kneel within the nave amid the standing congregation; the "co-standers" join normally in the service with others except they may not take communion.⁵

As the years passed the system grew more complex and more severe. The Council of Ancrya wrestled with the problem of Christians who had weakened under persecution and denied their Lord. For them discipline consisted of "one year as hearers, three years as kneelers and two years as costanders."⁶ Years later, St. Basil of Caesarea in letters written between A.D. 374-376 prescribed for the sin of adultery a total of fifteen years of discipline, four with the weepers, five with the hearers, four with the kneelers and two with the standers.⁷

Discipline had taken on absurd measures. In the seventeenth century John Owen aptly wrote:

Discipline hath been metamorphosed into a hideous monster, an engine of...domination and tyranny, for ...the terror of the souls of men, and the destruction of their lives with all their earthly concern, unto the erection of a tyrannical empire.⁸

Discipline can be an ugly word. Jay Adams says of church discipline, "In most minds today, discipline means the way you get rid of trouble-makers." Discipline can also be dangerous. Warning of the abuse of discipline, John White writes, "Corrective discipline is dangerous because some people, even Christian people, have a need to control others. We must not be naive about the horrendous possibilities."¹⁰

Ought discipline be neglected, abandoned because of the abuses? No. The dangers of failing to restore it are incalculably greater. But because of the abuses of the past and the potential for abuse in the future, there is a need for Christians to have a proper understanding of Jesus' principles in Matthew 18:15-17.

Confusion over Discipline

Maryland pastor, Mark Littleton, conducted a survey of pastors and church leaders on the subject of church discipline. In his survey he discovered five main hindrances to the effective use of church discipline: (1) people are confused, wondering whether discipline will do any good; (2) people are confused as to which sins to discipline; (3) people fear the outcome; (4) people associate discipline with excommunication, church courts, and intolerance; and (5) people have few models of positive discipline to imitate and do not know how to "speak the truth in love," or "admonish the unruly," or "restore those caught in a fault."¹¹ Church discipline has been thwarted because of the confusion surrounding it.

In many churches there is the belief that church discipline is incongruous with the tenor of church life. Pastors and people have opted for alternatives. J. Carl Laney points out that in many churches counseling has now replaced discipline. He further points out that much of what, in an earlier era, demanded action such as excommunication now calls for an "I'm OK, you're OK" session. He cites one pastor's comment, "I think we sometimes think in terms of long-term counseling to solve problems rather than discipline."¹²

Misunderstanding over its purpose, fear of the outcome, ignorance of the procedures, questions over which sins, and contemporary teachings now offering affirmative action alternatives are but a few of the issues that have contributed to the confusion that surrounds church discipline.

Failure to Uphold the Teaching of Jesus

The basic New Testament text on church discipline is Matthew 18:15-17. It has always been considered important, partly no doubt because it represents the Word of Christ, and partly because it offers systematic instruction upon the subject as a whole.¹³ As the very Word of the Lord, it demands the Christian's response.

In our day, churches have become tolerant of sin even when it is found in their own people. This warrants the wrath of God upon that church's indifference to His holiness (I Peter 1:16). A church does not have the right to ignore persistent sinful behavior among its members.¹⁴ Our Lord has not left that an option available to His churches. Daniel Wray states:

Since the church is bound to give full allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ and this means to love him and keep his commandments [John 14:15, 23, 24; 5:10, 14], it is evident that the church's honesty of heart is tested when confronted with the choice between obedience and disobedience in this matter of the discipline of its members. It is just as necessary to exercise proper discipline as it is to preach the Word.¹⁵

Because of the abuse, the confusion, and the failure of Christians to uphold the teaching of Jesus, the practice of discipline has been neglected; in many churches it has fallen by the wayside. Discipline must be restored. What is needed is a thorough and clear study of Matthew 18:15-17 in order to understand the teaching of Jesus regarding discipline.

There is a need to investigate what the Bible says about disciplining sinning saints. The need for such an investigation goes far beyond the range of this study. The purpose of this study is to examine exegetically those crucial principles of discipline as taught by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-17.

MATTHEW 18:15-17 VIEWED CONTEXTUALLY

The most important issue in regard to church discipline is the matter of understanding the purpose behind Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18:15-17. As one examines the literature on church discipline it becomes apparent that a variety of definitions of church discipline have been offered. Further examination into the literature often reveals that the writers hold to differences of purpose in the teaching of Jesus. It would seem that a false position here may later lead to errant conclusions, even tragic results. Why did Jesus make the statements in verses fifteen to seventeen? In order to arrive at Jesus' purpose for His teaching, and ultimately the principle behind discipline, one must consider the context in which this teaching was given.

A Consideration of the General Context

Matthew 18:15-17 represents perhaps the most familiar and foundational passage concerning discipline in the New Testament. Despite its familiarity in its own right, the passage belongs integrally to Matthew's Gospel, particularly to the setting in chapter eighteen. The passage must be read and interpreted within its Gospel context. Therefore, an understanding of the Gospel of Matthew is essential to proper study of the passage.

Authorship of the Gospel

External evidence strongly supports the view that the Apostle Matthew wrote the Gospel which bears his name. Many early church fathers cited Matthew as its author, including Pseudo Barnabas, Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Origen.¹⁶ Homer Kent writes:

Modern doubts of Matthaean authorship are the product of hypotheses developed to explain the Synoptic Problem. But these hypotheses cannot alter the testimony of the early church, whose writers quoted this Gospel more frequently than any other.¹⁷

The extensive tradition that Matthew wrote the Gospel strongly commends him as its author.

The internal evidence also supports the fact that Matthew was the author of the first Gospel. This book has more references to money than any of the other three Gospels. In fact this Gospel includes three terms for money that are found nowhere else in the New Testament: "The two drachma tax" (Matthew 17:24); "a four drachma coin" (17:27), and "talents" (8:24). Since Matthew's occupation was tax collecting (Matthew 9:9; Luke 5:27), he had an interest in coins and noted the cost of certain items. The profession of tax collector would also necessitate an ability to write and keep records. Matthew obviously has the ability, humanly speaking, to write a book such as the first Gospel.

Date of the Gospel

Pinpointing the date of the writing of Matthew's Gospel to a specific year had proven impossible. Various dates for the book have been suggested by conservative scholars. C.I. Scofield suggested as early a date as A.D. 37. Few scholars give a date after A.D. 70, since Matthew made no reference to the destruction of Jerusalem. Furthermore, Matthew's references to Jerusalem as the "Holy City" (Matthew 4:5; 27:53) imply that it was still in existence at the time of writing.

Some time seems to have elapsed after the events of the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ. Such passages as 27:8 ("unto this day") and 28:15 ("until this day") argue for an interval of time, and yet not so much time that the Jewish customs had ceased. Since church tradition has strongly advocated that this was the first Gospel account written, perhaps a date somewhere between A.D. 45-60 would satisfy all the demands mentioned.¹⁸

Character, Purpose, and Theme of the Gospel

The character of the Gospel of Matthew can be summed up in one word by saying it is Jewish. This can be shown in several ways. It is seen first of all by Matthew's style of writing. A. T. Robertson comments, "He has the instinct for Hebrew parallelism and the Hebrew elaboration, and his thought and general style are Hebraistic."¹⁹ Matthew's vocabulary as well as his style is Hebraistic for he uses such terms as "kingdom of heaven," a phrase distinctly Jewish and occurring in no other Gospel. The term "Son of Man" is Jewish and looks back to Daniel 7:13. The words "righteous" and "righteousness" occur more often in Matthew than all the other three Gospels combined.²⁰

The subject matter dealt with in Matthew is also Jewish: law, ceremonial defilement, sabbath, the kingdom, Jerusalem, the Messiah, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, etc. Another indication of the Jewish character of the Gospel is seen through the many appearances of Old Testament quotations: there are 129 Old Testament references, usually

found in proving a point to the Jewish reader. Another mark of Jewish character is the number of Jewish customs left unexplained indicating that his readers understood the custom. A final indication of the Jewish character of Matthew is the testimony of the early church.

Irenaeus says: "Matthew issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews," and "The Gospel of St. Matthew was written for the Jews." Origen says, "St. Matthew wrote for the Hebrew." Eusebius says: "Matthew...delivered his gospel to his countrymen."²¹

It becomes apparent by the character of the Gospel that Matthew directed his Gospel toward Jewish readers.

Unlike the Gospel of John (20:30, 31), Matthew contains no statement of purpose. But clearly the content of this Gospel sets forth Matthew's purpose for writing. Matthew has a twofold purpose in writing his Gospel: primarily, to prove Jesus is the Messiah; secondarily, to explain God's kingdom program to his readers. As the Jewish readers were exposed to the Gospel they would be challenged by its references to the Old Testament, which they accepted as authoritative, and would see that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the promised Messiah. Primarily, then, Matthew portrays Jesus the way he does to prove He is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. But a non-believer (Jew or otherwise) might reply, "If Jesus is the promised Messiah of Israel, where is His kingdom? Where is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises to Israel?" Because of the validity of those questions, Matthew also wrote to explain God's kingdom program as it relates to Jesus, Israel, and the church age. Matthew shows how the earthly literal kingdom was offered to Israel in the person of Jesus, the Messiah, at His first coming, but the Jews rejected that earthly kingdom when they rejected their King (21:28-22:10; 11:16-24). Matthew then goes on to show how the kingdom was postponed because Israel rejected its Messiah and that this kingdom will be established at Christ's second coming (19:28; 20:20-23; 23:39; 24:29-31; 25:31-46). In the meantime God is engaged in a new and previously hidden program: the church, which Christ predicted in Matthew 16:28. Matthew shows the universal character of the church program (24:14; 28:19, 20) revealing that Gentiles are also embraced in God's program. Therefore, to claim that Matthew's purpose was only to prove Jesus as Messiah is erroneous; Matthew also shows how the Gentiles are related to the Jewish kingdom program. The theme of Matthew's Gospel is the royal aspect of the Lord's person and ministry: Jesus is King. References to Jesus as the "son of David," the legal heir to the throne are many (1:20; 2:2; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30, 31; 21:9, 15; 24:45). The many references to Christ and His kingdom also support Matthew's emphasis on our Lord's regality (3:2; 4:17; 10:7; 12:28; 16:28; 20:21; 26:29; 28:18). Matthew not only portrays Jesus as the Christ, but as the royal Messiah.²²

Didactic Structure of the Gospel

Matthew was a skilled literary craftsman. Commentators have noticed that Matthew appears to have made a practice of grouping his materials

so that three, five, six, or seven incidents, miracles, sayings, or parables appear together.²³ The clustering of materials was done for a very practical purpose; the goal was pedagogical.²⁴ Scroggie comments, "Jewish Christian catechists would use them in their catechumen classes, and in this way much narrative and teaching could be held in the mind."²⁵

The didactic character of the Gospel is further seen by the emphasis on the discourses.

Matthew's Gospel is didactic in emphasis. It contains the largest single block of discourse material found in the Gospels (chapters 5, 6, and 7), and there are other long passages (chapters 10, 13, 18, 23, 24, 25) which reproduce Jesus' teaching.²⁶

The teaching discourses of Jesus can be identified in Matthew's Gospel by means of a formula repeated five times, which reads literally (with slight variations), "And it happened, when Jesus had finished these sayings, that he..." after which a new phase of the story begins (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). In each case the formula concludes a major section of teaching by Jesus. These sections, the five major discourses of Matthew, have been identified as:

- Chapters 5-7 Jesus' teaching about discipleship
- Chapter 10 Jesus' teaching about mission
- Chapter 13 Jesus' teaching in parables (the overall subject being "the kingdom of heaven")
- Chapter 18 Jesus' teaching about relationships among disciples
- Chapters 24-25 Jesus' teaching about the future.²⁷

The third evidence of the didactic character of the Gospel is shown by Matthew's use of Old Testament prophecies which proved invaluable in instructing the Jews concerning Jesus.

By continuity is meant the fundamental pedagogical principle of proceeding from the known to the unknown. Every preacher and every teacher follows this principle when he tries to convey a new thought to an adherent. Matthew made the Old Testament his apperceptive basis. Evidently those for whom he intended his Gospel were either quite familiar with the law and the prophets or else they acknowledge their authority.²⁸

A fourth indication of Matthew's pedagogical emphasis is the fact that his grammar is that of an historian. Scroggie writes, "The aorist tense is predominant in Matthew, and denotes simply and graphically what has taken place."²⁹ "The use of the genitive absolute indicates the same thing."³⁰ This emphasis on the historical makes the Gospel valuable to use to instruct as well as to convince.

The final evidence of the didactic character of the Gospel is Matthew's use of the verb "to disciple." The verb, *matheteuo*, means either "to be a disciple" or "to make a disciple," but in either case there is learning involved. It occurs three times in Matthew (13:52; 27:57; 28:19) and only once elsewhere (Acts 14:21).³¹ The fact that Matthew is the only Gospel writer to use this word seems to indicate that he thought highly of making disciples by teaching, and perhaps had this in mind as he wrote his Gospel.

Outline of the Gospel

The outline presented here follows Matthew's argument as it is based on the recurrence of the phrase "and it came to pass when Jesus had ended," which Matthew appears to have used to mark the divisions of his Gospel. This same clause occurs in Matthew 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1 and 26:1, and it always occurs at the end of an address. The fact that the addresses are extended and they occur at the end of each section implies they are climactic. It appears Matthew uses the narrative sections as an introduction to and a setting for the discourses of Jesus. Because of this it appears that the events generally recede into the background and the discourses assume the important role. This does not imply that the events are unimportant; they are crucial, since the discourses would be meaningless and contradictory without them.³² The Gospel of Matthew may be outlined briefly as follows:

- I. Prologue: The Origin and Birth of Jesus the Christ (1:1-2:23)
- II. The Gospel of the Kingdom (3:1-7:29)
 - A. Narrative (3:1-4:25)
 - B. First Discourse: The Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7; 29)
- IV. The Manifestation of the King (8:1-11:1)
 - A. Narrative (8:1-10:4)
 - B. Second Discourse: Mission and Martyrdom (10:5-11:1)
- IV. Teaching and Preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom: Rising Opposition (11:2-13:53)
 - A. Narrative (11:2-12:50)
 - B. Third Discourse: The Parables of the Kingdom (13:1-53)
- V. The Glory and Shadow: Progressive Polarization (13:54-19:2)
 - A. Narrative (13:54-17:27)
 - B. Fourth Discourse: Life under Kingdom Authority (18:1-19:2)
 1. Setting (18:1-2)
 2. Humility and greatness (18:3-4)
 3. The heinousness of causing believers to sin (18:5-9)
 4. The parable of the lost sheep (18:10-14)
 5. Treatment of a sinning brother (18:15-20)
 6. Forgiveness (18:21-35)
 7. Transitional conclusion: Introduction to the Judean ministry (19:1-2)
- VI. Opposition and Eschatology: The Triumph of Grace (19:3-25:46)
 - A. Narrative (19:3-23:39)
 - B. Fifth Discourse: The Olivet Discourse (24:1-25:46)
- VII. The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus (26:1-28:20)
 - A. The Passion (26:1-27:66)
 - B. The Resurrection (28:1-15)
 - C. The Risen Messiah and His Disciples (28:16-20)

Matthew 18:15-27 is in the fourth discourse (18:1-19:2), which deals with life under kingdom authority, part of the larger context of the progressive polarization of Christ's ministry (13:54-19:2). In particular, Matthew 18:15-17 is in that portion of the fourth discourse dealing with the treatment of a sinning brother (18:15-20).

Fourth Discourse of the Gospel

Matthew 18 contains the fourth of five discourses which are recorded in the Gospel. This fourth discourse, like the previous three, is bracketed by remarks which indicate that it was delivered on the occasion specified (18:1 with 17:24; 19:1). It would seem that the entire discourse should be considered a unit.³³ The theme of the discourse appears to be the necessity of humility, and it is addressed to the disciples of the King. Humility appears essential for five reasons. It is necessary (1) for entrance in the kingdom (18:2-3), (2) for greatness in the kingdom (18:4), (3) to prevent offenses (18:5-10), (4) to carry on correct discipline in the church (18:12-20), and (5) in forgiving brethren (18:21-35).

Many writers compare Matthew 18 with 1QS, the "Manual of Discipline" at Qumran, and interpret it as a regulation for the life of the Christian community. However, there are two major reservations against such a comparison. First, there is very little in Matthew 18 that has the flavor of regulation and much that deals with principles. The closest approximation to "regulation" may be verses 15-17, however, they appear far less concerned with mechanical details than the importance and means of reconciliation. The entire chapter appears to show up the carnality of the opening question (18:1) and establishes a radical set of values for kingdom greatness. Second, the Qumran covenanters had little doubt of their identity or place in God's eschatological scheme. But in Matthew 18 it appears that the disciples are at a critical turning point in their training and sanctification, men of defective understanding in need of further instruction.³⁴

A Consideration of the Preceding Context:

Matthew 18:1-14

The Setting: Matthew 18:1-2

Jesus had returned to Capernaum (17:14) and had just attended to the payment of the temple tax (17:25-27). The discourse is introduced with the pronoun "that" (*ekeinos*) and a time designation inferring that this discourse is to be separated in thought from the preceding portion. However, the particle "then" (*ara*) of verse one shows some sort of connection. Mark 9:33-34 presents the situation. The disciples had been disputing along the way over who was to be the greatest. Mark tells us that Jesus was "in the house," the definite article indicating "the house" as being one that was well known, one where Jesus probably stayed regularly while He was in the city.³⁵

Matthew writes that "the disciples came to Jesus." In all probability the disciples had not intended to reveal to Jesus what they had been discussing on the way to the house. But the Lord knew, so Mark tells us that Jesus broached the subject by inquiring, "What were you discussing on the way?" Embarrassed silence apparently followed. Then they came out with it: they had been "arguing" (Luke 9:46) about rank or status, and their question had been as it was now, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"³⁶

Jesus had earlier said there will be distinctions in the kingdom (Matthew 5:19); and recently three of them had been specially favored (Matthew 17:1-3), while Peter had been repeatedly singled out (14:28-29; 15:15; 16:16-18, 22-23; 17:4, 24-27)—though sometimes for rebuke.³⁷ Perhaps the singling out of Peter by the tax collectors (Matthew 17:24-27) may have intensified the jealousy among the other disciples.

Mark describes Jesus as sitting down and then calling the twelve to Himself and making an opening statement before He called the little child to Himself. It has been suggested that the child may have been Peter's, if the house is his (Matthew 17:15; Mark 9:33).³⁸ To speculate who this child actually was is useless. The point is that this was indeed a child, endowed with all the favorable and amiable qualities generally associated with childhood.³⁹

Humility and Greatness: Matthew 18:3-4

With the solemn introductory formula, "Amen, I say to you," Jesus warns His disciples that they must "change and become like little children;" for unless they do, they will "never enter the kingdom of heaven." The child is held up as an ideal, not of innocence, purity, or faith, but of humility and unconcern for social status. Jesus is advocating humility of mind (18:4), not childishness of thought (cf. 10:16).⁴⁰ With such humility comes childlike trust.

Humility is thus presented as the principal thing in a child to be imitated by Messiah's subjects, and in that the disciples had just shown themselves particularly lacking.⁴¹

The disciples must "change" (i.e., "turn yourselves," *straphete*: used reflexively)⁴² from their present conduct and attitudes and adopt this new norm. It is important to notice that Jesus does not say "except ye become as little children" but "except ye be converted, and become as little children."

Humility is so important that entrance into the kingdom becomes contingent upon it. The necessity of humility is emphasized by the emphatic negative (18:3).⁴³ The person who truly humbles himself like this child⁴⁴ is "the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (18:4): the expression completes a link with 18:1, and the present tense may suggest that the disciple's greatness, doubtless made obvious in the consummated kingdom in the future, has already begun here as far as kingdom norms are concerned.⁴⁵

The Heinousness of Causing Believers to Sin: Matthew 18:5-9

The Lord goes on to establish the importance of humility in living the present life by pointing out the peril of offending a believer. In order to avoid this believers are to manifest humility one to another by receiving one another. The verb the Lord uses here, “to receive” (*dexomai*) means to welcome, to receive favorably.⁴⁶ The one who welcomes “a little child like this in My name” is not welcoming literal children but “children” defined in the previous verses—those who have humbled themselves to become like children, i.e., Jesus’ true disciples. They are not received because they are great, wise, or mighty, but because they come in Jesus’ name (18:5)—that is, they belong to Him.⁴⁷ The person who welcomes one of these “little ones,” these disciples of Jesus, simply because they are His, also welcomes Jesus Himself, for it is impossible to separate the Lord from those whom He considers His own (cf. Matthew 10:40-42; Acts 9:4-5; 22:7; 26:15).

The opposite of receiving one of these “little ones” is to “entrap” (*skandalizo*) one of them (18:6). The idea of “entrap” goes beyond the idea of stumbling (from which one may rise) and denotes spiritual destruction.⁴⁸ Hendriksen writes:

It is clear that the Lord is speaking about possibilities that may, and often do, arise when some “worldly” (see verse 7) person...commits the grave sin of trying to lead one of God’s true children astray. He is saying that even if the sin be planned against only one of those so precious in God’s sight, physical death for such a planner—yes, death of the most gruesome kind—would be preferable.⁴⁹

The verse is clear: whoever, believer or unbeliever, damages a believer spiritually incurs the greatest wrath of Christ.⁵⁰

Likewise, in Matthew 18:7, the world is indicted for the offenses it has caused believers. The Greek text proclaims a “woe” (a proclamation of judgment, not of sympathetic sorrow) on the world as the source of all stumbling. Jesus pronounces this woe (“because of stumbling blocks”) because of the things that cause the stumbling already referred to in 18:6.⁵¹ Such things must come, Jesus says, for it is impossible in this present realm of sin to put an end to every temptation; but this inevitably does not mitigate the responsibility of those through whom they come.⁵²

Jesus then abandons denunciation of the world’s causing His disciples to stumble and He tells His disciples that they may prove to be not only victims but also aggressors. Entrapments may come to us, not only through other disciples or through the world, but even from within our own selves because of the sin that remains in us.⁵³ Jesus offers a hypothetical thought, “if hand, or foot, or eye cause thee to stumble, cut them off, cast them from thee” (18:8). The decision whether they do so or not, and therefore the adoption of the necessary remedy, rests within the person himself.⁵⁴ Jesus is not teaching self-mutilation, cutting off one’s hand or foot or gouging out one’s eye (cf. 5:29-30). Doing that would not remove the source

of offense, which is the heart (cf. 15:18-19). Jesus was saying one must remove whatever offends. To keep from offending, radical changes are often necessary.

It may seem as if Jesus has wandered away from the subject of guarding his "little ones," and not tempting them to sin. In reality, however, he has not, for is not taking drastic action against the temptations by which Christ's disciples themselves are assailed one of the best methods of preventing themselves from enticing others?⁵⁵

The Parable of the Lost Sheep: Matthew 18:10-14

Matthew 18:10 clearly follows verses 5-9; but because it also forms a fitting inclusion with verse 14, verses 10-14 must be read together in light of the preceding pericope. This link raises important questions concerning the relation of the parable here and the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:3-7. Almost all scholars hold that one parable stands behind both Gospels, and then the debate is held over which form and setting are most primitive.

The parable of the lost sheep in Matthew 18 is addressed to the disciples; the parable in Luke 15 is addressed to Pharisees and teachers of the law, in defense of Jesus' attitude toward sinners. The views offered by most scholars presuppose that at least one of the two settings is a late creation by the church or by one of the two evangelists, Matthew or Luke, in order to deal with some new problem.⁵⁶ But would it not have been possible, even probable, for Jesus to have applied a parable to more than one situation?⁵⁷ Furthermore, Carson adds:

It is remarkable how different Matthew's and Luke's forms of the parable are when closely compared in the Greek text. Almost every relevant term is not the same as in the parallel, and the few that are the same are well within the bounds of repetition expected in an itinerant ministry. The evidence suggests that these are two similar parables, both taught by Jesus, but with very different aims.⁵⁸

Verse ten continues the concern for "these little ones" 18:5-9. Jesus says that "these little ones," believers in Him, must be treated with respect because "their angles in heaven" always see the face of the heavenly Father. Although it appears Jesus is showing how precious each one of "these little ones" is in God's sight, and that what God values so highly men must not despise, it is not quite certain what all the details mean. It is not within the range of this article to offer a discourse on the meaning of "their angels...in heaven"; suffice it to say it is the "little ones who believe" in Jesus (cf. 18:6) that are specially under consideration.⁵⁹

The words "for the Son of Man is come to save that which was lost" (cf. 18:11), are lacking in the earliest witnesses of the Alexandrian, pre-Caesarean, Egyptian, and Antiochene text types, causing many commentators to hold to the position that they were probably inserted from Luke 19:10. The debate is unsettled and there appears to be insufficient evidence that would call for the omission of 18:11. Further discussion would be inappropriate for the purpose of this article.

The fact that God is indeed a loving Father, one who tenderly cares for His flock, introduces the parable of "The Lost Sheep." Here Jesus offers another reason not to despise these "little ones": the Shepherd—the father (18:14)—is concerned for each sheep in his flock and seeks the one who strays (18:12).

The incident of a sheep being lost..is not unusual among shepherds. If sheep stray away from the flock, they are utterly helpless. "In such a case they become bewildered, for they have no sense at all of locality. And if they do stray away, they must be brought back." [Fred Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1953), p. 158.]...Morning and night the shepherd carefully checks his flock. At these times a lost sheep is quickly identified. It is also noted that the shepherd knows his flock so well that at any time during the day when one is missing he becomes conscious of the loss. "The absence of any one is immediately felt." [G. M. Mackie, *Bible Manners and Customs* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1886), p. 35]⁶⁰

His concern for the one wandering sheep is so great that He rejoices more over its restoration than over the ninety-nine that do not stray (18:13). The implication of Jesus' teaching is obvious: with a God like that, how dare anyone cause even one of these sheep to go astray?

Jesus then drives the lesson home to the hearts of His disciples: the heavenly Father is unwilling for any of "these little ones" to be lost. What Jesus is asserting so emphatically is that the Father is definitely interested in each of His sheep, even His wandering sheep. If that is His will, it is shocking that anyone would seek to lead one of "these little ones" astray. It should be noted that this love for the individual sheep is not at the expense of the entire flock but that the flock as a whole may not lose a single one of its members. Plummer writes:

The connection of the parable of the Lost Sheep (12, 13) with what precedes is that God cares for children and for childlike believers as a shepherd cares for his sheep. If one of them is lost, He will make every effort to recover it, and will rejoice greatly if He succeeds. If God takes so much trouble to recover a little one that has strayed, how grievous it must be to cause it to stray. Rather, every effort should be made to prevent it from straying...For the remainder of the chapter the connecting thought is the forgiveness of sins, a subject which is suggested by the parable of the Lost Sheep.⁶¹

The possession of humility is proven not by passively waiting for one to beg forgiveness and then granting it. It is manifested by actively seeking out the erring brother and attempting to make him penitent.

It cannot be coincidence that the classical passage on corrective church discipline follows on the heels of the parable of the shepherd who left his ninety-nine sheep to search for the one that was lost.⁶² The story seems to set the stage for what follows, pointing to the centrality of reconciliation. Thus at the outset of the classical passage on discipline Jesus illustrates that a sinning brother is a brother whose fellowship we have lost. Our approach to him is a quest to restore fellowship. Sin has brought alienation. Reconciliation is needed to overcome it.

A Consideration of the Following Context:

Matthew 18:18-35

The Authority for Discipline: Matthew 18:18-20

The power of the keys. In Matthew 18:15-17 Jesus presented guidelines for the exercise of discipline. Those biblical guidelines imply that the local church⁶³ has authority to carry discipline to the point of putting someone out of the church. From where is that authority derived? From the Bible? From the church constitution? From the elected officers? After giving instructions regarding the process for church discipline, Jesus speaks to the matter of authority for church discipline. In Matthew 18:18-20 He declares that God has given the church authority to exercise discipline:

Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on the earth concerning any matter that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For in the place where there are two or three, having been gathered because of My name, there I am in their midst.

After acknowledging the truth of Peter's confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16), Jesus began to reveal His plan for building the church. In the context of that discussion He tells Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19). In Matthew 18:20 Jesus repeats the essence of that statement. Jesus sets the statement in the form of a solemn declaration by His use of the word "truly" (literally "amen"). He leaves off the reference to "the keys of the kingdom," but undoubtedly the concept of the keys lies at the root of the power to "bind" and "loose."

To understand the concept of the keys it is helpful to recall Isaiah 22:22 where the Lord promises to "set the key of the house of David" on the shoulder of Eliakim, an official in the court of Hezekiah. The Lord then declares, "so shall he open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open." In ancient times, a house steward carried the keys of the master's house and bore the responsibility for its administration, including opening and shutting the door. The exercise of authority was associated with the possession of the house key. The key, therefore, became a symbol of authority. Thus, in Revelation 1:18, Christ has "the keys of hell and of death." The possession of the "keys" suggests Christ's sovereign authority over death and hades.

In Matthew 16:18 Peter is given the "keys" which represent his administrative authority in relationship to God's kingdom program.

A key is an instrument designed to allow entrance into something to which ordinarily one would be unable otherwise to gain entrance or access, and to which he finds himself shut out before receiving the key. Now the "keys" mentioned by Christ were the "keys of the kingdom of heaven." The place to which access was to be gained was the "kingdom of heaven." It does not seem that Christ meant that the "keys" were to enable Peter to be present himself in heaven, but that they were for a spiritual access to the resources and decrees of heaven while Peter was yet upon the earth.⁶⁴

In Matthew 18:18 Jesus switches from the singular pronoun "you" (*soi*) to the plural (*humin*) and thus extends to all his disciples the authority He first delegated to Peter "as a representative disciple."⁶⁵

There are those who suggest that the authority to "bind" and "loose" rests only with Peter and the eleven apostles. But as Lenski points out, "not in an official capacity, but as members of his church."⁶⁶ The general nature of the instruction is revealed by the words, "moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee" (18:15). Certainly Jesus did not intend His instruction to apply only to sinning apostles. Thus, Lenski appropriately concludes that the authority symbolized by the keys "has been entrusted to no special order of men but to the entire church."⁶⁷

The terms for binding and loosing reflect language used by the rabbis when making decisions regarding the application of a particular law.⁶⁸ Moral teaching and decision making in Judaism took the form of rulings by the rabbis on problem cases brought to them. Out of these decisions there accumulated a fund of precedents and principles, called the *halakah*, the moral tradition, which continued from one generation to the next to be useful in relating the law to current problems.⁶⁹ In making decisions they would either impose the obligation of the law ("bind") or remove the obligation of the law ("loose").⁷⁰ By these Rabbinic declarations, certain activities were either prohibited or permitted.⁷¹ This terminology was also used in a judicial sense to declare a person free from or liable to punishment.⁷²

By taking over these terms from rabbinic usage, Jesus gives to His church, represented by the disciples, the authority to "bind" and "loose"—an authority previously claimed only by the recognized religious authorities.

The power of binding and loosing which, according to Matt. 16:19 and 18:18, Jesus promised to Peter and to the other disciples was the power to decide with authority questions of faith and morals in the early church.⁷³

The church exercises its authority to "bind" when it imposes discipline on an unrepentant sinner. The immediate context suggests that the "binding" applies primarily to the excommunication of the sinning saint. The power to "bind" and "loose" is essentially the authority to administer corrective discipline in the local assembly of believers. The church exercises its authority to "loose" when it forgives and restores a repentant sinner to full fellowship.

There is some debate as to the grammatical meaning of the words for binding and loosing in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18.⁷⁴ Grammatical analysis reveals these words to be periphrastic future perfects. Some versions translate them as simple futures, "shall be bound" and "shall be loosed." Others translate them "shall have been bound" and "shall have been loosed." This is a significant issue. As simple futures, the words of Jesus would mean that God has committed Himself to ratify the decisions of the church, i.e., He will endorse in heaven what the church determines on earth. While this view is possible, it appears to involve an unlikely delegation of divine authority whereby God actually subjects Himself to the authority and decisions of the church rather than exercising sovereignty over it.

A more likely and grammatically defensible position is to translate the verbs "shall have been bound" and "shall have been loosed." This viewpoint is defended in detail by the eminent Greek grammarian, J.R. Mantey. On the basis of his study, Mantey asserts that the verbs in Matthew 16:18 and 18:18 must be translated, "shall have been bound" and "shall have been loosed." "No longer," he writes, "are there grounds to claim that in general clauses the perfect may be translated as a future."⁷⁵

According to Mantey's interpretation, in the matter of "binding" and "loosing," the church may so be led by the Spirit of Christ in her midst (cf. 18:20) that the church's decisions reflect the very will of God in heaven. Carson explains in his comments of Matthew 16:19:

The periphrastic future perfects are then perfectly natural: Peter accomplishes this binding and loosing by proclaiming a gospel that has already been given and by making personal application on that basis. Whatever he binds or looses will have been bound or loosed, so long as he adheres to that divinely disclosed gospel. He has no direct pipeline to heaven, still less do his decisions force heaven to comply; but he may be authoritative in binding and loosing because heaven has acted first (cf. Acts 18:9-10).⁷⁶

Weeks states in his discussion of "binding" and "loosing" in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18:

Contrary to the usual translation of this verb into the simple future passive tense, which has been copied by translators for the most part, it should properly be translated as a regular future perfect passive tense. This would make the verbs to read "shall have been loosed (and bound)." The point that Jesus was making so plain was that the earthly decrees of those in the leadership of the church should conform to the will and plan of God in Heaven. In light of the infinite holiness of God and the inviolable moral decrees which issue from this holiness, who would be so foolish as to assert that God would make His decrees conform to those of sinful men? Yet that is...the only conclusion that can be drawn if the simple, future tense be used to translate the verbs in question.⁷⁷

In his comments on the tenses of Matthew 18:18, John Yoder writes, "What 'has already been bound in heaven' would be hard to know from the original context, but for twentieth century evangelicals who argue this point...it probably means 'what is in the Bible.'"⁷⁸

What decisions does Christ have in mind that the church share in? Some hold that the passage refers to the priest's authority to forgive sin. However, Scripture is quite clear that God alone has such authority (cf. Mark 2:1-12). Others believe that Peter used the "keys" to open the church to the Jews (Acts 2), the Samaritans (Acts 8), and the Gentiles (Acts 10). But these views do not fit in the context of church discipline. The context of Matthew 18:18 reveals the meaning of the authority given by Christ to the church. The context, of course, is church discipline. Jesus is saying to His disciples that when they exercise church discipline—correcting sinners and forgiving the repentant—such decisions reflect the will of God in heaven. Thus, Weeks concludes:

...the "binding and loosing" according to parallel Rabbinic usage referred to the legislative and executive power of the church in spiritual matters including moral discipline. Yet this power, contrary to the way it was used arbitrarily by the religious leaders of Christ's day, was to be exercised in the church only in accordance with divine precepts (the future perfect passive translation). Both of the privileges of the "keys" and "binding and loosing" were given to all of the disciples and were to be the inheritance of every faithful witness of Christ the Son of the living God and to the church down through all ages of its continuance.⁷⁹

The priority of prayer. In Matthew 18:19 Jesus says, "Again I say unto you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father, who is in heaven."

This verse, as Matthew 21:22, is often viewed as a general promise to answer the corporate prayers of God's people. Scripture is rich in prayer promises (Matthew 21:22; John 14:13-14; 15:7-8, 16); but as this passage deals with prayer it is restricted by the context and by the phrase *peri pantos pragmatos* ("about anything") which could be rendered "about any judicial matter," a sense nicely fitting the argument in Matthew 18.⁸⁰ Here Jesus is instructing His disciples on the matter of prayer in regard to church discipline.⁸¹ He seems to be saying that those who prayerfully seek God's wisdom in exercising discipline may have confidence that the decisions they make will reflect the will of God in heaven.

The instruction in verse 19 is set in the form of a conditional statement ("if"). This suggests that agreement is a prerequisite to having prayer answered. The verb "agree" (*sumphoneo*, literally "to produce a sound together") suggests the idea of coming to agreement by talking over a matter. The figure "two" is not to suggest a low level of participation; the number "two" comes from verse 16, "take one or two more with you." At this level of confrontation, two believers may be sufficient to deal with the matter. The point is that full agreement—whether the group be large or small—is essential to answered prayer regarding discipline.

Jesus seems to be setting forth a principle of decision-making based on consensus and unanimity. The promise given here by Jesus is that God will provide wisdom, guidance, and power for decision-making to the church that is united in its prayers regarding matters of church discipline.

The presence of Christ. In Matthew 18:20 Jesus explains why united prayer will be effective: "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst." Jesus offers His disciples the assurance that even when as few as two or three believers are gathered together, He is spiritually present in their midst. This truth applies to discipline, but is not limited to it.⁸² It is a basic principle giving validity to the preceding instructions.

It should be noted that the reference to "two or three" does not suggest that anytime a small group of believers gathers a church is formed. The point is that Christ is present among even the smallest group gathered. It should be noted also that the mention of two or three suggests that disciplinary matters do not necessarily have to become public knowledge.

Christ's presence provides the reason for the Father answering prayer. Gundry thus asks, "How could the Father refuse those who prayed gathered in the name of his Son and blessed with the presence of his Son?"⁸³

Forgiveness: Matthew 18:21-35

The inquiry about forgiveness. "Then came Peter to Him, and said, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?" (Matthew 18:21).

After all of the discussion of discipline and how one is to confront the sinner and restore him if he repents, Peter asks a very insightful question. Does forgiveness have a limit?

Peter knew that forgiveness was a characteristic of God and was to be exemplified in the righteous. Having been trained in the Law and the Prophets as well as Jewish traditions, Peter also knew that he had to forgive his fellowman.⁸⁴ The Pharisees required that one forgive the offender twice. Peter perhaps recalled that Christ had earlier said, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matthew 5:39). It would seem as though Christ's requirement was the same as the Pharisees'. The Pharisees had added that if one wanted to go beyond what was required by the Pharisaic interpretation of the Law, one should forgive three times.

The questions of Peter already goes beyond the limits permitted by the rabbis. A Tosephta runs: "If a man sins once, twice, or three times, they forgive him; if he sins a fourth time, they do not forgive him" (Joma 5:13). When he suggests seven times as the limit, "Peter thinks he has taken a long step towards his Master" (Bonnard)⁸⁵

The extent of forgiveness. To answer Peter's question concerning forgiveness, Jesus said that Peter should forgive not seven times, but "seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:22). According to Jewish idiom, "seventy-seven times" meant innumerable times.⁸⁶ Thus, Jesus points out the necessity of humility in forgiving brethren by saying we are to forgive without keeping a record of the number of times forgiveness has been sought and granted.

The example of forgiveness. Jesus illustrates the principle of humility in forgiveness with the parable of the unmerciful servant.

The parable begins with the formula "the kingdom of heaven is like."

This means nothing more than a lesson may be drawn from what follows, which all who hope to enter the kingdom should lay to heart.⁸⁷

In the parable a king called his servants to account. One owed him ten thousand talents. In today's money the amount owed by this servant would be several million dollars.⁸⁸ Because the servant was not able to pay, the king commanded that the servant be sold into slavery to satisfy the debt which it was the king's right to do. However, since the price of a slave was thirty pieces of silver, the servant's enslavement could not possibly satisfy the indebtedness. Even though the servant had accumulated a debt that could not possibly be repaid in a lifetime of labor, he asked for additional time. The king was under no obligation, but was a merciful ruler; therefore he went beyond his servant's request and canceled the debt so that the servant left the king's presence free from all obligation.

Jesus in His parable now presented the servant who had experienced such unlimited mercy as the creditor of a fellow servant who owed a hundred denarii, the equivalent of a few dollars, or the wages for one hundred days' labor.⁸⁹ Such a debt could be discharged through the diligence of the debtor.⁹⁰ After the creditor demanded immediate repayment, the debtor asked for additional time with a promise to repay the debt. But the creditor threw the debtor into prison until the debt could be paid. The lack of mercy shown by the creditor was conveyed to the king. In response, the forgiven debtor was summoned into the presence of the king, who said, "I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" (Matthew 18:32-33).

It is in the response of the king to the lack of mercy of the wicked servant that the answer to Peter's question is found. The forgiven servant was responsible to forgive debtors in the same measure that the king had extended forgiveness. Since mercy had been extended to the servant, that servant was responsible as a creditor to extend mercy to debtors who sought forgiveness.

No one can measure one's indebtedness to God for the forgiveness God has granted through Jesus Christ who provided salvation for sinners. Therefore, there should be no measure to the forgiveness that is granted to those who seek forgiveness from believers.

The whole chapter presses home the insistence of Jesus on forgiveness and reconciliation. The Christian community is a community of those whose sins have been forgiven by God; it shows itself unworthy of the divine forgiveness if its members are unwilling to forgive the comparatively trifling offenses of a brother. The concluding parable illustrates this doctrine by a horrible example of refusal to forgive an equal by one who has received from his king forgiveness of something infinitely greater.⁹¹

Summary

In this section, the general context, the immediate preceding context, and the immediate following context of Matthew 18:15-17 were considered. It was seen that Matthew wrote his Gospel with a pedagogical emphasis in mind. In the Gospel are recorded five major discourses by Jesus, the fourth discourse being found in Matthew eighteen. It was seen that this fourth discourse deals with Jesus' teaching about relationships among His disciples.

The fourth discourse was occasioned by a question of the disciples as to their relative ranking in the kingdom. Jesus used the opportunity to instruct His disciples. The purpose of His instruction was threefold. First, it was necessary to correct the pride with which they were anticipating their positions in the kingdom. A second purpose was to instruct the disciples further concerning entrance "into" and greatness "in" the kingdom. Finally, this discourse was given to prepare the disciples for the coming church age: they were to accept all who believed; they were to be wise concerning offenses; they were to be concerned for one another, even the wayward, as seen by Jesus emphasis on restoration. Following his teaching on discipline the Lord spoke of authority and forgiveness in the church in the coming age.

Editor's Note: Part II: An Exegetical Study in which the author examines Matthew 18:15-17 exegetically revealing Christ's teaching of four steps in church discipline will follow in the Spring 1989 issue.

NOTES:

¹Marlin Jeschke, *Disciplining the Brother* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1972) 13

²Daniel E. Wray, *Biblical Church Discipline* (Carlisle, Pa: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1978) 1

³J. Carl Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985), 41; also see Jeschke, *Disciplining the Brother* 21-40

⁴John White and Ken Blue, *Healing the Wounded* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1985) 21

⁵John T. McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) 96

⁶Ken Blue, "International Church Discipline" (M.C.S. Thesis, Regent College, 1979)

⁷John White and Ken Blue, *Healing the Wounded*, 21

⁸John Owen, *The True Nature of a Gospel Church and Its Government, The Works of John Owen* (London: Banner of Truth, 1689) 16:11

⁹Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 24

¹⁰John White and Ken Blue, *Healing the Wounded*, 22

¹¹Mark R. Littleton, "Church Discipline: A Remedy for What Ails The Body," *Christianity Today* (May 8, 1981) 30-31

¹²Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline*,

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¹³Jeschke, *Disciplining the Brother*, 41¹⁴Wray, *Biblical Church Discipline*, 1¹⁵*Ibid.*, 4-5¹⁶For further attestation see Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968) 193¹⁷Homer Kent, *Matthew The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962) 929¹⁸Gordon Lovik, suggested date in unpublished class notes, *New Testament Introduction* (Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary, Lansdale, Pa) 40¹⁹A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 123²⁰Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980) 16²¹W. Graham Scroggie, *A Guide to the Gospels* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1975) 248²²Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 20²³Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Robert Scott, 1911) xix-xxii²⁴Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 22²⁵Scroggie, *A Guide to the Gospels*, 311²⁶Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) 150²⁷J.D. Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) 7-25²⁸Merrill C. Tenney, *The Genius of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951) 75²⁹Scroggie, *A Guide to the Gospels*, 110³⁰Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament* 513³¹Scroggie, *A Guide to the Gospels* 277³²Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 24-25³³I see no reason to adopt the view of H. W. Ridderbos (*Matthew*, 331) that Matthew combined several sayings of Jesus, spoken at different occasions, into one discourse. For the most part the ideas of Matthew 18 follow one another very naturally.³⁴Carson, *Matthew*, 396³⁵R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943) 678³⁶Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 686³⁷Carson, *Matthew*, 396³⁸*Ibid.*³⁹Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*,

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⁴⁰John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1886) 382⁴¹Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 382⁴²Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 680⁴³Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 216⁴⁴The sense of Mt. 18:4a is not "humble himself as this little child humbles himself" but "humbles himself until he is like this little child." A child has no idea that he is great, and so in the kingdom of heaven the greatest is he who is least conscious of being great.⁴⁵Carson, *Matthew*, 397⁴⁶Walter Grundmann, "dexomai" TDNT, ed Gerhard Kittel, transl Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 1:52-54⁴⁷Carson, *Matthew*, 398⁴⁸Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 686⁴⁹Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 689⁵⁰Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 686⁵¹Carson, *Matthew*, 398-399⁵²Plummer, *Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 249⁵³Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 689-690⁵⁴Plummer, *Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 250⁵⁵Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 692⁵⁶Carson, *Matthew*, 400⁵⁷For further discussion reference Warren Vanhetloo, "Two Ninety and Nines," *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal* (Spring 1986) 2:9-22⁵⁸Carson, *Matthew*, 400⁵⁹For further discussion of "their angels...in heaven" reference Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 384-385⁶⁰Warren Vanhetloo, "The Shepherd Motif in the Old Testament" (Th D Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1965) 83⁶¹Plummer, *Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 252⁶²Vanhetloo, "Two Ninety and Nines," 18⁶³Though the Bible may occasionally use the term "church" for all Christians, the concept of local congregational autonomy is in view with regard to church discipline. We understand more clearly and correctly

the priority of the congregation when we study what it is that the church is to do. It is only in the local face-to-face meeting, with brethren and sisters who know one another well, that the process which Jesus describes can take place. Only when people live together in the same city, meet together often and know each other well, can this exercise of discipline be carried out in a fully loving way. The process of binding and loosing in the local brotherhood provides the practical and theological foundation for the centrality of the local congregation. Gordon H. Lovik in "An Historical Study of Special Revelation Concerning the Local Church," *Central Bible Quarterly*, (Fall 1972) 15:28-29, comments on Matthew 18:17: "Regarding the identification of the ekklesia, it cannot be supposed that this is the Jewish synagogue or the body of the disciples gathered around Christ. Matthew in using the article with ekklesia identifies the church with the church spoken of in chapter sixteen. This church of Matthew 16:18 has the responsibility to judge in matters of discipline. In other words, they have to be a living organized entity that is capable of rendering judgment in temporal matters...This use of the word ekklesia must refer to the local church. Only a group of called-out individuals, organized together, can render judgment in matters of discipline. Thus, this is the generic use of the word ekklesia and represents all local New Testament churches. The reality of the ekklesia was future, but this revelation was preparatory for the local church which came in the book of Acts."

⁶⁴Richard C. Weeks, "The Doctrine of the Keys," *CBQ* (Winter 1965) 8:2

⁶⁵Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 369

⁶⁶Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 704

⁶⁷*ibid*

⁶⁸Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 1:ii.85

⁶⁹John H. Yoder, "Binding and Loosing," *Concern* (Scottsdale, Pa: 1967) 14:5

⁷⁰To "bind" is to enjoin, to forbid or make obligatory; to "loose" is to leave free, to permit.

⁷¹Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Testament, Its Background, Growth, and Content* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1965) 51

⁷²In *TDNT* (1:20) Prof. Buchsel, author of a very brief article on "binding and loosing" agrees that the *halakah* meaning of moral decision making was the standard usage, yet denies that Jesus could have meant this. The denial is, however, dictated

not by lexical consideration but by Buchsel's own theology. The article by J. Jeremias on "keys" is more helpful (*TDNT*, 3:749ff). He points out that the scribes claimed this same authority (Mt. 23:13).

⁷³Metzger, *The New Testament*, 51

⁷⁴For a thorough discussion of the various meanings reference Carson, *Matthew*, 370-374. Reference also Weeks, "The Doctrine of the Keys," 46-55.

⁷⁵Julius Robert Mantey, "Distorted Translations in John 20:23; Matthew 16:18-19 and 18:18," *Review and Expositor* Summer, 1981) 78:415

⁷⁶Carson, *Matthew*, 373

⁷⁷Weeks, "The Doctrine of the Keys," 69-70

⁷⁸Yoder, "Binding and Loosing," 24

⁷⁹Weeks, "The Doctrine of the Keys," 70

⁸⁰Carson, *Matthew*, 403

⁸¹J.D.M. Derrett ["Where Two or Three are Convened in My Name ...: A Sad Misunderstanding," *Expository Times* (1979-80) 91:83-86] has argued that v. 19 does not deal with prayer at all. The two who agree are the offender and the offended. They come to agreement on earth about any judicial matter they have been pursuing: the verb *aito* can refer to "pursuing a claim," as well as asking in prayer. Carson (*Matthew*, 403) explains that the promise, then, is that if two individuals in the church come to any agreement concerning any claim they are pursuing, "it will be allowed, ratified on the part of my heavenly Father." The argument appears weak in that it puts God under the authority of a church, even two individuals in agreement. Tasker (*Matthew*, 177) remarks, "the agreement of two is not a magic which forces God to answer, but it implies that they have met as disciples which involved the making only of such requests as the Master will endorse."

⁸²In the matter of discipline, as two settle their differences, their attitude and conduct ought to reflect an awareness of the personal presence of Christ.

⁸³Gundry, *Matthew*, 370

⁸⁴Simon Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 64

⁸⁵Francis W. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, 1981) 381

⁸⁶Kistemaker, *Parables*, 64: "Jesus multiplies the two numbers seven and ten—numbers which symbolize completion—and adds another seven. He means to say, not seven times, but seventy-seven times; that is completion times completion

and completion. He conveys the idea of infinity.”

⁸⁷Willoughby C. Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912) 201

⁸⁸The word to describe the amount owed has a basic underlying meaning of that which is numberless, countless, infinite. Reference Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press,

1968) 1154, “The sum of ten thousand talents amounts to several million dollars.” Reference also Gundry, *Matthew*, 373, “zillions of dollars.”

⁸⁹H. Wayne House, *Chronological and Background Charts of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 27

⁹⁰Kistemaker, *Parables*, 66

⁹¹Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 381