

PERSONAL OFFENSES WITHIN A LOCAL CHURCH

Local Church Discipline

An Examination of Matthew 18:15-17

by Elder Bob Allgood

"Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen -"

Our Lord did not leave his churches without an answer to every question that needs to be answered. Paul said, "foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strife". Jesus Christ did not leave his churches without a Biblical solution for every problem that arises. We do not have to go begging to the world or man-made philosophies to find answers to our questions or solutions to our problems. The Word of God provides all the answers and all the solutions the church will ever need - read II Tim 3:16-17.

In Matthew 18:15-17 we are given a three step solution for solving all PERSONAL OFFENSES THAT ARISE WITHIN A LOCAL CHURCH. Notice I said WITHIN THE LOCAL CHURCH. Some have misunderstood this passage (while others have deliberately misused and abused this passage) and claim it teaches the primary Biblical solution to ALL OFFENSES, both public and personal, inside and outside a local church. But I do not believe in this passage, Jesus is teaching a solution for: (1) PUBLIC OFFENSES WITHIN THE CHURCH (2) HERESY OUTSIDE THE LOCAL CHURCH or (3) PERSONAL

OFFENSES BETWEEN MEMBERS OF DIFFERENT CHURCHES. The Lord being my helper I will endeavor to prove what is the correct teaching of this passage of Scripture. In order to do that we will need to establish some BASIC DEFINITIONS.

FIRST, THE CHURCH: When Jesus said "And if he neglect to hear them, tell it unto THE CHURCH: but if he neglect to hear THE CHURCH --", He is not speaking of some Universal Denominational Church Headquarters. He is not talking about the "Invisible Body of Christ" - The Church - that is made up of all the Elect of God. He is speaking of a LOCAL VISIBLE ASSEMBLY OF BORN AGAIN BELIEVERS WHO HAVE BEEN BAPTIZED BY AND INTO A LOCAL AUTONOMOUS CHURCH. Old School Primitive Baptist believe in the timely authority of a local autonomous church. We have no headquarters. We do not believe is a Denominational Church Headquarters. We have no Big Church to direct us or to solve all of our problems. SO I ASK YOU - Which Church is going to hear this matter ?

SECOND, THE TRESPASS or FAULT: When Jesus said "Moreover, if thy brother shall TRESPASS against THEE, go and tell him his FAULT - BETWEEN THEE AND HIM ALONE --" He is not talking about a trespass against the whole church or the family of God. He is talking about A PERSONAL OFFENSE between TWO PEOPLE - THEE and HIM (generically includes sisters also). TRESPASS here means "to sin against or to offend". To "tell him his fault" is to rebuke or reprove, i.e. to admonish with evidence of wrong doing. The word FAULT in this passage does not have the exact same meaning as the word FAULT in Galatians 6:1 where Paul said "If a man be overtaken in a FAULT, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted". The FAULT of Gal. 6:1 is a side slip into error wherein the person needs help to recover. The FAULT in Matthew 18:15 is an admonishment, rebuke or reproof for A PERSONAL TRESPASS. The TRESPASS of Matthew 18:15 is the same PERSONAL TRESPASS talked about by Christ in Luke 17:3-4, where the TRESPASS must be rebuked, and REPENTANCE must precede forgiveness.

I will not use this space to talk about the petty things that should not be considered A PERSONAL OFFENSE, such as the unintentional failure to shake hands with someone or to forget to tell them how nice they look on Sunday morning. GOD FORBID that we fall out with a brother or sister over such trivial matters. If I have visited with a brother or sister several times during the week, I am surely not going to be hugging their neck and saying "I have missed you so much" or "I am so glad to see you again" as I would be doing and saying that to someone I have not seen for awhile. If they get OFFENDED because I showed more consideration to someone else on Sunday morning, SOMETHING IS DRASTICALLY WRONG WITH THEIR REASONING ! Furthermore, differences of opinion do not have to result in an offense that DEMANDS the three (3) steps of Matthew 18:15-17 be followed.

THE QUESTION IS: ARE WE GOING TO BELIEVE WHAT JESUS TAUGHT or ARE WE GOING TO TWIST AND WREST THE SCRIPTURES TO TRY AND MAKE THEM SAY WHAT WE THINK THEY OUGHT TO SAY or WHAT WE WANT THEM TO SAY IN ORDER TO FIT A MAN-MADE DOCTRINE. If we believe what Jesus says, common sense will show us that He is teaching us how to solve PERSONAL OFFENSES WITHIN THE LOCAL CHURCH.

The first step of this solution works well for most personal offenses, but it is not intended to solve all personal offenses, especially those I call LONG DISTANT OFFENSES or offenses between members of different churches. Follow with me in your Bible as I try to prove the correct teaching of this passage.

The FIRST step says: "If thy brother (generically includes sisters also), shall trespass against thee, GO TO HIM, and tell him his fault between thee and him alone -". This may seem an unpleasant thing to have to do, but our Lord places the responsibility, the first step, in resolving the offense, with the offended and not the offender. If one is "longsuffering" and not easily offended, this first step is usually never needed. (Notice that "Longsuffering" is not a requirement for HERESY or when dealing with a HERETIC [Titus 3:10-11]). "GOING TO HIM" who has offended is easy to do within a local church. But, how can you "GO TO" a brother or sister who offends you, but lives hundreds or thousands of miles away.

Some may say, "travel to him". Well that will work only if the offended is physically able and can afford to travel. Some may say, "write to him or her". That is alright, and perhaps an acceptable way to solve a problem, but it compromises the teaching to "Go to him". The same is true with a telephone call, and I don't think our Lord had telephone calls in mind when he gave these instructions. If traveling to him or writing to him or calling him resolves the offense and "he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother". But what if he will not hear thee, and the offense is not resolved, how do you obey the rest of this teaching.

The second step says: "But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established". Remember we are trying to prove that this solution is not intended for PUBLIC OFFENSES or PERSONAL OFFENSES BETWEEN MEMBERS OF DIFFERENT CHURCHES. This second step works well within a local church. Then you can take "one or two more with you". But if the offense has been between two (2) church members in different churches who do not live near each other, we have a problem. The wealthy may be able to fly themselves and one or two more all across the country. Perhaps writing back and forth between two or three people may "establish every word". But this is not the context and teaching intended by our Lord. Furthermore, if you try to apply this teaching to a PUBLIC OFFENSE - where the whole church has been offended the results get ridiculous.

How would you obey this second step if a PUBLIC OFFENSE was committed by a church member in a church with one hundred members present at the time. Do you think that each of the one hundred must go to the member one at a time, and when he would not hear them, each one must return with one or two more that each word may be established in the mouth of witnesses ONE HUNDRED TIMES OVER. No, that is not the teaching of Matthew 18:15-17. If a member commits a PUBLIC OFFENSE, he or she should be confronted by the Pastor and Deacons and then the matter properly handled in a conference.

The discipline of Ananias and Sapphira teaches us that the Disciples did not take Matthew 18:15-17 to include PUBLIC OFFENSES. By the way when it comes to GIVING, it's a good thing for most of us that we no longer live in the Apostolic days, as some of our Liberal Tithing Teaching Preachers would have us to think. IF WE DID SOME OF THEM MIGHT GET STRUCK DEAD FOR TELLING LIES !

If a member is guilty of a PUBLIC IMMORAL ACT known by the members of his or her church, they should be confronted and dealt with in the same way. This is what Paul taught in I Cor. 5:1-5 when he wrote, "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you --". This was a PUBLIC SIN. Paul did not tell them to "GO TO" the individual one at a time and take one or two more with them to be witnesses in order to establish the fact of fornication OVER AND OVER AGAIN. No, he said "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together (in the assembly, in a lawful conference) -- deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh -". In other words, put him out of THE CHURCH to be judged. If this second step does not prove to you this teaching is for offenses within the local church, the third step surely will.

The third step says: "If he shall neglect to hear them, TELL IT UNTO THE CHURCH - but if he neglect to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as a heathen and a publican". SO I WILL ASK YOU AGAIN -- Which Church is going to hear this matter ? The church of the offender or the offended ? If a brother or sister from another church has offended you and THE FIRST TWO STEPS DID NOT RESOLVE THE OFFENSE, (if you were even able to carry them out) WHOSE CHURCH IS TO HEAR THE MATTER ? If an Elder is preaching HERESY on the other side of Town, or across the State or across the ocean in the Islands of the Philippines -- and his church supports his heresy - DO YOU WANT THE OFFENSE HEARD BEFORE HIS CHURCH OR YOUR CHURCH ? Whose Church has the authority to hear a matter or force their decision on another church ? We do not live in the days of Apostolic Authority. A Counsel may work well for resolving "doctrinal" differences (Acts 15) or clarifying questions of practice. But such can not be binding on a local church against their will without the establishment of a HIERARCHY.

There is a difference between PERSONAL OFFENSES and PUBLIC OFFENSES. All personal offenses within the local church should be handled according to Matthew 18:15-17. Personal offenses (long distance offenses) that happen between those who are members of different churches should be resolved between the two parties. PUBLIC OFFENSES, especially those that concern HERESY, HERETICS, AND UNBIBLICAL PRACTICES must be handled by Scriptures such as: Romans 16:17-18, II Corinthians 6:14-18, Ephesians 5:11, Titus 3:10-11, Philippians 3:17-18 and II Thessalonians 3:14-15.

Much more could be said about this subject, and I am sure that I have not covered all the details. But may God help us to rightly divide his word and thereby resolve all offenses, both PERSONAL and PUBLIC, according to the Word of God.

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