

# **The Truth about Matthew 18**

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# The Truth about Matthew 18

Disagreements occur in every association. Families occasionally quarrel. In organizations of every type, opposing ideas frequently lead to disputes. Even intimate relationships end because of past or present conflicts. Tragically, God's Church is not immune to this phenomenon.

For this reason, the Savior gave us specific instructions explaining how conflicts are to be handled. He stated that if someone has offended us, we are to take steps toward reconciliation (Mat. 18:15). But what kind of offense did He mean? Are we to get upset because someone took the seat we generally sit in? Do we feel insulted because our opinion was ignored? Were we hurt when we asked a friend for assistance and they were unable to accommodate us? Are these the kinds of situations we should find offensive, or are there times when we should simply let some things pass? Shouldn't we first ask what are we angry about?

A minister once said "If you offend another, you are often wrong. If you become offended, you are always wrong." While these words might seem like an oversimplification, they contain a great deal of truth. When we honestly analyze our circumstances, there are not many situations that should upset us to the point where we become offended:

Great peace have those who love Your law, and  
nothing causes them to stumble (Psalm 119:165).

In every relationship there may be things that annoy us, but should we be offended by them? Consider the kinds of issues God deems legitimate offenses:

You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. And you shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I *am* the LORD. You shall not cheat your neighbor, nor rob *him*. The wages of him who is hired shall not remain with you all night until morning. You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but shall fear your God: I *am* the LORD. You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor (Leviticus 19:11-15).

Offenses such as these are not trivial. They are foundational to Christian living. If we offend in any of these ways, we must take steps toward reconciliation. When attempting to reconcile, we should always consider that we all make mistakes and all have sinned (Rom. 3:23). In fact, most of the time, our mistakes are not intentional. Friends, family, and brethren generally do not try to hurt one another.

Nevertheless, legitimate issues do occur that cause schisms in relationships, and those issues must be addressed. Christ explained how offenses are to be handled among brethren, but more often than not—God’s Church does not follow His instructions.

### ***A Common Abuse***

A few years ago, a member of the Church of God was called into his pastor’s office. He found himself in the company of several elders. His pastor proceeded to accuse him of saying something terrible to another member. Instead of going to his brother alone, the offended member lodged a complaint with the ministry. The complaint contained some truth and some exaggeration. Despite hearing only one side of the issue, the

pastor assumed the accused had wronged the other and proceeded to suspend him from attending services.

When the member tried to explain the situation, he was ordered to be quiet. When he asked if he could question the accuser, his pastor said that such questions would put too much pressure on the other member. Thus, the man was denied the opportunity to confront his accuser. He was told to go home, think about what he had done, and wait for the pastor to call him. The ministry would decide in the next few weeks whether the accused had properly repented and could return to services.

“Why are you doing this?” asked the bewildered man. “We are applying Matthew 18,” they responded. But were they really? How would Christ judge this incident? Did these ministers comply with His instructions regarding resolving conflict among brethren? Do the Scriptures agree with this method of judgment in personal relationships? The truth is this kind of confrontation is exactly what God wants us to avoid.

### ***What Does Matthew 18 Actually Say?***

The Messiah told us specifically how we are to handle conflicts, yet few understand the importance and purpose behind His instructions. Consequently, many fail to properly follow them. But an honest and careful review of Christ’s words will help us to understand His purpose, and hopefully motivate us to sincerely follow His method. In this famous set of instructions, the Messiah said:

Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell *it* to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you that

if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them (Matthew 18:15-19).

What is the reason for instructing Christians to first go alone and discuss the offense with our brother? If that fails, why are we to then take witnesses? What do the Scriptures mean by “tell *it* to the church”? If the accused refuses to listen to the ministry, why are they no longer considered members of God’s Church? Christ said that whatever is bound or loosed on earth will be bound and loosed by the Father. Does this statement mean that God sanctions anything a minister decides? What was the Savior’s intent when He said, “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them”?

The following pages will make the answers to these questions clear. As readers examine the words, it will become clear that, when properly executed, Christ’s principles are the best possible way to resolve conflicts. They are essential keys to successful relationships.

### ***The Way of the World***

The famous comic strip *Peanuts* humorously illustrated how personal conflicts are frequently resolved today. Lucy entered a room and demanded that Linus change the TV channel. “What makes you think you can walk right in here and take over like that?” asks Linus. “These five fingers,” says Lucy. “Individually they’re nothing, but when I curl them together like this into a single unit they form a weapon that is terrible to behold.” Intimidated, Linus replied, “Which channel do you want?” Then, turning away, he looks at his fingers and says, “Why can’t you guys get organized like that?”

This illustration reflects the fact that those with the greatest power often use it to get their way. This can be expected because it is a part of our human nature, but this should not be the behavior of true Christians.

We need to understand an important truth. In such a power play, no one really wins. Even when one party seems to get his or her own way, lingering resentment and hostility can lead to retribution. To one degree or another, the relationship becomes damaged and both parties ultimately suffer loss.

This should not happen in Christian relationships. A dispute is not a condemnation in itself. In God's eyes, the vital issue is how we respond. Is there a response that will avoid frustration, friction, arguments, and strife? There is!

In the law, history, and parables of the Bible, the Eternal provides answers to every question regarding how to live life to its fullest. This is certainly true regarding conflicts among brethren. Christ provided a simple and effective way to handle our differences. Tragically, few understand His principles and comply with what He commanded.

### ***The Potential for Conflict***

Christ's admonition begins with "if your brother sins against you." The word "sins" is rendered as "trespass" in the King James translation. It means to "miss the mark, to err," or to "offend" (*Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, G264). What is particularly insightful is the modifying word "if." This word is translated elsewhere as "when," "though," or "whenever." These definitions make the point that, given enough time, people will both offend and be offended. An adage expressing this truism says, "If we are going to dance together, we will occasionally step on one another's toes." In that light, the verse could be rendered as **WHEN** your brother sins against you go, and tell him his fault between you and him alone.

It is certain that the potential for conflicts between individuals who live, work, play, or worship together will always be present. What matters is how we resolve such disagreements. We must understand this issue if we hope to achieve spiritual maturity (Mat. 5:48). We must realize that our covenant with God requires that we work out our conflicts.

Christians are obligated to show love to all whom the Father has called (Rom. 12:1; Luke 17:10; John 17:10).

Having the same spiritual Parent, we are joined together by His Spirit as brothers and sisters in Christ (Mat. 23:9; Eph. 3:14-15; Heb. 2:11). We have been given the same commandments, statutes, and laws. We share the same vision and are striving to attain the same destiny. Therefore, our relationship with God is greatly affected by the way we interact with one another (1John 2:9-11; 4:20).

### ***The Importance of Unity***

So important is unity among brethren that Christ said we are in danger of God's judgment if we refuse to reconcile (Mat. 5:21-22). The Messiah also said that if we have offended another, and have not taken steps toward reconciliation, we should not give our offering to God. Notice the following admonishment:

Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift (Matthew 5:23-24).

If we know we have hurt someone, or if a brother has a legitimate complaint against us, and we make no effort to reconcile, Christ related that we **MUST** attempt to make amends before we present our gift. This requirement demonstrates that God's primary concern is for us to love one another. As Christ said:

By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:35).

Christ's words highlight the importance our Creator places on unity. In His example of presenting a gift to God, His words depict someone having a conflict with us. In Matthew 18, the circumstances are reversed. Instead of having offended another, the other has trespassed against us. In both cases, however, our goal must be to seek reconciliation.

## Step 1 - Go Alone

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It must be remembered that Christ was speaking of legitimate trespasses—not just an annoyance. If another person has lied or cheated us, wrongfully taken advantage of a situation, or caused us emotional harm, then we have a genuine reason to seek reconciliation. In such cases, we should apply the instructions the Savior gave when He said:

Go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.  
If he hears you, you have gained your brother  
(Matthew 18:15).

We are to first go to the person we believe has wronged us, and do so alone. We are NOT to go to our minister or anyone else in the congregation. Sadly, many disregard this vital step. Instead of going to the offender alone, brethren have shared their offense with others in an attempt to get people to believe their side. Some have even gone straight to the local pastor and asked for the ministry to get involved. Very few have followed Christ's instructions by going to their brother alone. But why did Christ require going alone in an attempt to reconcile?

God's desire is that we keep mistakes or conflicts confined to the related parties. This prevents the spread of gossip or rumors. We do not want to damage another person's reputation. We should not ask a minister to pass judgment before we attempt to put the issue to rest ourselves. We must give our brother or sister a chance to explain their side and correct the situation privately.

If we were the accused, we would certainly desire confidentiality. This perspective clearly shows that following the first step is an aspect of keeping the second great commandment to love our neighbor as ourself (Mat. 19:19).

Every one of us should give this some serious thought. No one wants others to hear about our personal sins or mistakes. Then why openly talk about the faults of our brother? It is entirely inappropriate to discuss personal issues with others

without first going to our brother alone. For this reason, the command from Christ was indicated long ago in the law of the Old Covenant. Moses wrote that:

You shall not go about *as* a talebearer among your people; nor shall you take a stand against the life of your neighbor (Leviticus 19:16).

God commands that we not be talebearers. This is an expression meaning “a *scandal monger*” (*Strong’s*, H7400). We must avoid peddling gossip by telling stories about others. Even if what we say is true, this practice invariably works to turn brethren against one another. We must not share our offenses with others. We must attempt to reconcile alone.

We also need to understand that God’s desire for us to go to an alleged offender alone is for more than simply the prevention of gossip. First, this allows a brother or sister to explain his or her position. We may find that we did not properly understand the circumstances, or that the perceived offense was not intentional. A little clarification can usually settle a matter quickly. This also gives the offending party a chance to acknowledge the wrong, apologize, and correct it privately. When we honestly think about it, most would desire the chance to make something right if we found that we inadvertently hurt another person.

Second, perhaps the other individual had no choice in what occurred. It could be that we misunderstood what actually happened. A friendly explanation can often put things in a proper perspective, and we may even find that there was no real trespass.

Third, if the person did break God’s law, they can repent without it becoming public knowledge. This takes ammunition away from those who look for any fault within the Church. The enemies of God’s truth greatly desire to see infighting among true Christians. To them, internal strife discredits the Church, its people, and its mission.

With this in mind, consider that Satan is known as “the accuser of our brethren” (Rev. 12:10). He is always on the

lookout for mistakes or failures so he can ridicule us before God. Unresolved conflict is the devil's way of creating division in an attempt to destabilize the Church (Mark 3:25). In fact, verbal assault among brethren is partly the basis for the current malaise of division within the Church.

### ***The Right Spirit***

God tells us to go alone to the other person, but what kind of attitude should we have toward the offending party? This question is vitally important. The famous author Charles Swindoll realized the importance of a right attitude and stated:

The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, the education, the money, than circumstances, than failure, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company... a church... a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice everyday regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past... we cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude. I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% of how I react to it ([http://thinkexist.com/quotes/charles\\_r\\_swindoll/](http://thinkexist.com/quotes/charles_r_swindoll/), retr. 10/17/2013).

Our attitude is of utmost significance in every aspect of our lives. It is of major importance when attempting to resolve a conflict. Consider the following scenario which many have experienced firsthand. We become offended by what we believe is a trespass against us. We wait, ostensibly to cool down or organize our thoughts. However, a slow burn begins to take place as we rehash the offense in our mind. Finally, by the time we act, we are so emotionally charged that we may erupt in anger, become defensive, and resist listening to reason.

When we take an issue to our brother with anger in our heart, do we really think we are fulfilling Matthew 18? Do we actually believe God's plan will work if we exhibit this kind of attitude? Far too many make the mistake of harboring anger when we should always approach our brethren with respect and love. As the Eternal stated:

You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I *am* the LORD (Leviticus 19:17-18).

This is the Almighty's imperative. We must not rebuke a person with the intention of avenging ourselves. We cannot bear a grudge or harbor feelings of hate or resentment. We are to love others the same way we want to be loved. That means we are to approach them seeking to heal the friendship with understanding, clarity, and truth. We should explain how they may have hurt us, and genuinely listen to their side of the story.

The people of God are all one family, and many of us may be working with one another in God's Kingdom for all eternity. Therefore, we must put forth sincere effort to cooperate in unity while mutually valuing one another.

Although the previous verses say that we are to rebuke our neighbor, this does not mean we are to come to them with railing accusations. The Revised Standard Version provides a more accurate translation of this verse, saying: "You shall reason with your neighbor, lest you bear sin because of him." In this context, it simply means to plead our case in a desire to help the other understand our perspective. However, we must be reasonable and sincerely listen to their side of the story.

We are not to revile our brother. We are not to try and hurt their feelings as a form of revenge. Such authority belongs to God alone (Deu. 32:35). Even the archangel Michael noted that he did not have the authority to rebuke the devil (Jude 9).

### ***Bearing Sin because of Him***

God said that we should “not bear sin” because of our neighbor (Lev. 19:17). What exactly does this mean? First, if our brother has sinned against us, and we don’t warn him, it actually becomes a sin to us. James wrote “to him who knows to do good and does not do *it*, to him it is sin” (Jam. 4:17).

In addition, the book of Ezekiel declares that every Christian has a responsibility to warn their brother or sister if they are trespassing. If we do not inform them, we may have their blood on our hands (Eze. 33:2-6). If we know the right thing to do, and fail to follow through, it becomes a sin to us. On the other hand, properly approaching our brother may save their life. As the book of James reminds us:

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins (James 5:19-20).

Not making our neighbor aware of a trespass reinforces improper behavior. It is as though we are condoning their sin. Thus, it perpetuates their sin while adding our error to theirs. Further, by avoiding the issue we may think we have buried it, but the matter tends to burn inside us. This can lead to a root of bitterness, thereby creating a sinful attitude (Heb. 12:15). This we must not do! As Paul wrote:

Be angry, and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil (Ephesians 4:26-27).

We might become upset because of someone’s actions, but we must not allow it to lead us to sin. We cannot let resentments seethe. We must take our conflict to our brother quickly, alone, and in an attitude of love and respect. If we do not take this approach, the Scriptures declare that the love of God is not in us (1John 2:9-10).

### **Consider Ourselves**

We should not attempt to justify criticizing someone by thinking we are following Christ's instructions. We are not the judge of our brother or sister. At this stage, we can go to them and plead our case, but there is something to always keep in mind. We must consider ourselves. Note the Apostle Paul's perspective of this issue:

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who *are* spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, **considering yourself lest you also be tempted**. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself (Galatians 6:1-3).

These Scriptures warn us to consider ourselves so that we are not tempted. But what does this mean? The answer is related to human nature where everyone is right in their own eyes (Pro. 21:2). When convinced that it is only the other person who did wrong, we are tempted to think we are superior. This can create the emotional environment for us to become guilty of the sin of self-righteousness.

Therefore, we are to go to our brother realizing the vital truth that we also make mistakes and sin! Our human nature is such that we are capable of the same sins as those who have offended us. Consequently, we must seek reconciliation in a humble attitude with a desire to forgive.

The Scriptures warn us to avoid being hostile when seeking to correct another individual. We must be meek and teachable in our approach. We should first pray for both the other and ourselves. Then, go to him or her with loving concern for the relationship we have with them and with God.

One of the most successful techniques to accomplish this is termed the "sandwich approach." In this method, the offended party inserts a complaint between two validations or compliments. This confirms our respect for the other person by

relating how much we care about them. We then present the problem while also suggesting a solution. Lastly, we conclude with a reassurance of our regard for them. This technique encourages the other to sincerely tell their side of the story. We genuinely listen to what they have to say, and honestly consider if there is merit to the explanation. Using this approach, we can be tender hearted, understanding, and compassionate, while still firm in our conviction.

Keeping the issue between the two parties avoids making enemies. It allows the people involved the opportunity to come to an agreement that will solve the problem and bring satisfaction to both sides. This method increases the likelihood of preserving, and even strengthening, the relationship.

## **Step 2 - Take One or Two Witnesses**

Christ requires us to first go to the brother alone. In most cases this will resolve the issue. However, there may be times when the offending party will not be agreeable and refuse to acknowledge the grievance. In such a case, Christ instructed us to do the following:

But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established' (Matthew 18:16).

This principle is not new. Centuries earlier, the same being who became Jesus Christ inspired Moses to record this statute of the Old Covenant:

One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established (Deuteronomy 19:15).

The community of God's people have always understood this to be a law declared by God (John 8:17; 1Tim. 5:19). Therefore, when a person is approached alone and refuses to listen to reason, we are to take one or more individuals with us. These witnesses should be individuals who have personal knowledge of the matter. First hand witnesses can affirm the truth, and their testimony should be enough to persuade the other party.

If no others were present to witness the offense, it is still appropriate to bring one or more individuals as observers. They should be respected individuals—persons of integrity. Having heard both sides of the issue, these witnesses can provide their view and help both sides to understand the proper course of action. They may offer advice regarding how they perceive the conflict. These people could be helpful to both sides, and the approach would still keep the issue contained to a minimum.

This second step again provides the opportunity to reconcile without permanent damage to the relationship.

In the event of an impasse, where it becomes necessary to take the next step by bringing the issue before the Church, these witnesses could impartially attest to the veracity of the two parties. They can confirm that the proper steps had been taken, attest to the reaction and attitude of the opposing parties, as well as testifying whether the story had changed in any way.

These successive steps display the wisdom of God. They keep the issue contained to a relative few, and decrease pressure on the persons involved. Going to our brother alone first, and later taking a witness if necessary, reflects enormous wisdom. Such steps can be used in any relationship whether in the family, workplace, or between friends. However, for those in God's Church they are imperative. Yet, how many people actually follow Christ's instructions for resolving conflicts? How often do we first go alone? How often do we take witnesses before running to tell the minister or other brethren?

This has been, and still is, a major problem in the Church of God. Too frequently, we do not follow Christ's instructions. Of this we can be sure: His system will not work properly if we do not properly work at using His system.

## **Step 3 - Tell it to the Church**

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If taking witnesses has no effect in turning a conflict around, if there is no satisfaction or reconciliation, then God provided a final recourse. As Christ stated:

And if he refuses to hear them (the witnesses), tell *it* to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector (Matthew 18:17).

If the individual does not agree with the complaint, and refuses to accept the advice of the witnesses, then members are instructed to tell it to the Church. Sadly, most skip the first two steps and go right to the third. Such circumventing of Christ's instructions is problematic on several levels. Not only is it a direct violation of Christ's command, it is unfair to the accused, it creates an atmosphere of resentment, and the reconciliation we are told to seek seldom occurs.

Only after the first two steps are followed can the third step of telling the Church be applied. But exactly how is this to be accomplished? Are members to tell everyone in the congregation? Should the matter be broadcast from the pulpit and spread through the gossip mill? How can we be certain of Christ's meaning?

### ***Defining Ekklesia***

Some have thought Christ's instruction to "tell it to the church" means to bring the matter before an entire congregation. This assumption stems from one of the definitions of the word "church" which is *ekklesia* in the Greek. This term can mean "a popular *meeting*, especially a religious *congregation*," but its root words refer to "a *calling out*" (Strong's, G1577). Thus, it has a wider application and can include all those called by God throughout time. However, during Christ's ministry *ekklesia* only referred to those

individuals called to serve in His work (Mat. 16:18). As Matthew George Easton wrote in his extensive Bible dictionary:

In the New Testament it (church) is the translation of the Greek word *ecclesia*, which is synonymous with the Hebrew *kahal* of the Old Testament, both words meaning simply an assembly, the character of which can only be known from the connection in which the word is found. There is no clear instance of its being used for a place of meeting or of worship, although in post-apostolic times it early received this meaning (*Easton's Bible Dictionary*, p. 389).

Prior to the first New Testament Pentecost, ancient Israel was considered the *ekklesia* (Acts 7:38). As Christian congregations grew during the first century, *ekklesia* came to refer to an Assembly of God's people in various locations to differentiate them from the Jewish synagogue (*The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, p. 541). The term was also used by Luke to refer to a law enforcing body. Notice his words:

“But if you have any other inquiry to make, it shall be determined in the lawful assembly (*ekklesia*). For we are in danger of being called in question for today's uproar, there being no reason which we may give to account for this disorderly gathering.” And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly (*ekklesia*) (Acts 19:39-41).

These verses help us understand that the way *ekklesia* is to be applied depends on the context in which it is used. As Matthew Easton stated, the character of this term in the Bible “can only be known from the connection in which the word is found.” In some cases, it applies to those duly authorized to be in positions of authority judging matters in the Church. Other times it refers to a congregation in a specific area, or the entire Church of God (1Cor. 1:2; Eph. 5:23). With this understanding, how is *ekklesia* NOT to be applied in Matthew 18:17?

### ***The Wrong Application***

Consider that if a conflict between brethren were openly discussed before an entire congregation it would cause many problems. It would spread the conflict to a broader audience instead of keeping it confined to a select few. It would embarrass all those personally involved by broadcasting accusations that have yet to be substantiated. It would divide the congregation as members chose sides. Imagine if a congregation of 100 or more were allowed to make the judgment. The divisive nature of such an approach is obvious. Some would agree with one side while others would not. For this reason, Christ nowhere speaks of the congregation taking a vote or a majority ruling. The truth is that revealing a personal offense to the congregation could destroy reputations and devastate the unity and fellowship of the group.

On a practical level, consider the composition of many congregations. There are members with little or no education. Some display a lack of judgment and have mismanaged their own affairs. A few may hold grudges, or have scripturally unsubstantiated doctrinal beliefs. Sadly, just as Christ prophesied, there are also tares within various congregations (Mat. 13:24-40). As Paul admonished, there would be unruly, feebleminded, and weak in our midst (1Ths. 5:14). Do we really want such individuals to judge personal matters of conflict between brethren? Or do we desire men who have exhibited wisdom and are qualified for leadership positions?

Despite the obvious problems such an ordeal would create, some continue to believe that Christ's words "tell *it* to the church" indicate that those in conflict are to allow the entire congregation to judge the matter. However, this belief does not align with the Scriptures. For example, Christ is only known to have used the term *ekklesia* twice. Both occasions are found in one gospel (Mat. 16:18; 18:17). In addition, there was no New Testament Church in existence when Christ gave His conflict resolution instructions. For this reason, when the Messiah told Peter that He would build His Church, He was referring to a

time to come; after which He would confer a degree of authority on Church leaders.

It must also be understood that Christ was not addressing the crowds of people who followed Him. Neither was He addressing women or children. Such individuals were not considered qualified to judge within the congregation. Christ was only speaking to individuals who would become apostles—future leaders of His Church (Mat. 16:17; 18:1). These men would eventually be empowered by His Spirit to ensure that decisions they made, in unity, reflected those in heaven (Mat. 18:18). This proves that unresolved issues requiring judgment were to be taken to Church leaders—not to everyone in the congregation.

### ***The Right Application***

Perhaps the most obvious indicator of sanctioned judgment proceedings is found in Christ’s requirements. He told the disciples that, “if two of you agree... it will be done for them by My Father in heaven” (Mat. 18:19). This is speaking of a select number that must agree—not an entire congregation!

For example, in Acts 15, the issue of circumcision was dividing the church. The issue was presented to the leadership in a council of elders. The entire Jerusalem congregation did not assemble to judge the matter. It was limited to the apostles, elders, and witnesses who were personally involved. As the historian wrote:

Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter (Acts 15:6).

Notice this same approach was used in judgments recorded in the epistles. A well-known example is found in the case in which both the elders and lay members at Corinth were aware that one of their brethren was living in sin with his stepmother (1Cor. 5). The Elders wrote to Paul about the issue, and he answered, writing to the Church, saying that there should be MEN wise enough to judge this matter. Notice that

he did not write that the entire membership should get involved. The congregation had already failed, and their failure is further evidence why the entire congregation is not to judge such matters.

The author of Hebrews also explained that God's people should, "Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of *their* conduct" (Heb. 13:7). This is speaking of individuals who were appointed to exercise authority within the congregation. The word "remember" means to be mindful of what they teach, and obey their instruction in the faith. The word *rule* means, "To lead, that is, command (with official authority) ... governor, judge, have the rule over (*Strong's*, G2233). This means that congregants are to respect the decisions of Church leaders who have been ordained with authority to make judgments. As the Apostle Paul wrote "Be ye followers of me, even as I also *am* of Christ" (KJV, 1Cor. 11:1).

This is why Christ designed His Church to have elders; men who have proven themselves, and had hands laid on them, for the purpose of being responsible for upholding doctrine. They are to be representatives of the Church with a level of authority that consists of teaching, correction, and making decisions regarding brethren. It is these men who are to judge conflicts among brethren when differences cannot be reconciled amicably.

### ***The Authority to Bind or Loose***

Many days prior to the instructions recorded in Matthew 18, Christ spoke to His disciples regarding making righteous judgments. This conversation sheds enormous light on the issue of taking matters to Church leaders. The Messiah asked His disciples who people thought He was. While the answers they gave varied, Peter understood the point and said:

"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed *this*

to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and **on this rock I will build My church**, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:16-18).

Some believe that Christ indicated Peter was the “rock.” However, the Messiah referred to the fact that He was the Rock upon which His Church would be built (1Cor. 10:4). After establishing His New Testament Church, the Savior would confer authority upon the apostles to bind or loose. As Christ continued to explain:

And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven (Matthew 16:19).

Christ made it known that the apostles would be placed in leadership positions with the authority to bind and loose. However, what did He mean? Could Peter change the rules regarding the Sabbath and allow brethren to do business on this day? Could the apostles rule that members did not have to tithe? Could elders change God’s command to take up offerings three times a year to seven? Could the ministry decide that the worship of graven images is appropriate?

Obviously, they could not change any of God’s laws. No human authority has the power to alter what God previously ordained. As Christ declared:

For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled (Matthew 5:18).

With this in mind, what did Church leaders have authority to bind or loose? The answer is that they would be empowered to make judgments regarding Church administration and conflicts among brethren. However, all such decisions **MUST** be in harmony with what God already

revealed in His law. Matthew 18 actually clarifies what Christ had said previously. Notice the similarity in words:

Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them (Matthew 18:18-20).

These parallel verses make the process of final decisions clear. By not following Christ's system, the outcome will be uncertain. By adhering to God's method, Christ will be in the midst of His leaders when they judge matters between brethren. His presence will ensure that the decisions they make are those bound by the Father.

### ***Moses' Seat and the Pharisees***

Until the time of the first New Testament Pentecost, the power of judgment rested on the Sanhedrin which was comprised primarily of Pharisees. Christ explained that the scribes and Pharisees sat in Moses' seat. Therefore, their judgments were binding as long as their decisions did not violate God's law:

Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, *that* observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do (Matthew 23:1-3).

Some have misunderstood these verses thinking that Christ was telling Christians to follow extra-biblical doctrines that the Pharisees had dictated. That is not what the Savior meant. The apostles understood that Christ had compared

Pharisaical doctrine to leaven, and later they had stated that “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Mat. 16:12; Acts 5:29).

With this understanding, we see that Christ’s reference to “Moses’ seat” pertained to the time Moses sat in judgment over the children of Israel. Moses never imagined that he had the authority to change doctrine. He could only teach what God had told Him. He was limited to making judgments based on the principles of God’s law, and could never change what the Eternal had declared!

The Scriptures depict a clear vision of what kind of authority Moses had. When his father-in-law came to visit, it was obvious that God’s servant made judgments to resolve conflicts among brethren based on God’s statutes and laws. As it is recorded:

And so it was, on the next day, that Moses sat to judge the people; and the people stood before Moses from morning until evening. So when Moses’ father-in-law saw all that he did for the people, he said, “What *is* this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit, and all the people stand before you from morning until evening?” And Moses said to his father-in-law, “Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a difficulty, they come to me, and **I judge between one and another**; and I make known the statutes of God and His laws” (Exodus 18:13-16).

Moses’ seat refers to his sitting in judgment over the people. This was an overwhelming job presiding over such a vast number. So, acting upon his father-in-law’s advice, Moses set up a system in which he appointed rulers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. These rulers enforced God’s statutes and laws and made judgments regarding conflicts among the people of Israel (Exo. 18:17-26). The more difficult matters were brought before Moses who, under God’s instruction, appointed 70 elders to assist him (Exo. 24:9).

Over time, this system of 70 elders became known as the Sanhedrin. Their house of judgment was eventually located in Jerusalem. Outlying cities would sometimes have their own smaller version of the Sanhedrin which usually consisted of 23 elders (*The Monarchic Principle: Studies in Jewish Self-Government in Antiquity*, p. 105).

Having adopted this system, the Pharisees appointed various men to sit in Moses' seat. They would hear cases concerning conflicts and criminal accusations that were based on the testimony of witnesses. These leading men were to make judgments by applying God's law in their decisions (Mat. 23:23).

During the time of Moses, if the rulers of tens, fifties, hundreds, and thousands believed the case was beyond their ability, it was sent to the captain of higher rank. The exceptionally difficult cases were judged by Moses himself. Later, an extensive priesthood was formed and an individual could take his issue to the priests who were given the authority to judge matters based on the principles of God's law (Deu. 17:8-12). The more difficult matters were taken to the high priest who wore the breastplate containing the urim and thumim; enabling direct yes or no answers to the Priest's questions (Exo. 28:30). In Christ's day, the Levites sent the more complicated or serious cases to the Sanhedrin who judged matters in the Jerusalem court.

### ***A Binding Decision***

Christ stated that a person taking a conflict before the judgment seat of the Pharisees was compelled to abide by their decision. This means that their judgment was binding before God (Rom. 13). However, He also made it clear that He did not mean that Christians were to follow the hypocritical practices of the Pharisees (Mat. 23:3).

When applying this principle to the Savior's instructions in Matthew 18, the person presenting a conflict before the Church leadership must also abide by the decision. That judgment is binding before God. This truth was declared to Israel centuries earlier when Moses wrote:

If a matter arises which is too hard for you to judge, between degrees of guilt for bloodshed, between one judgment or another, or between one punishment or another, matters of controversy within your gates, then you shall arise and go up to the place which the LORD your God chooses. And you shall come to the priests, the Levites, and to the judge *there* in those days, and inquire *of them*; they shall pronounce upon you the sentence of judgment. You shall do according to the sentence which they pronounce upon you in that place which the LORD chooses. And you shall be careful to do according to all that they order you. According to the sentence of the law in which they instruct you, according to the judgment which they tell you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside *to* the right hand or *to* the left from the sentence which they pronounce upon you. Now the man who acts presumptuously and will not heed the priest who stands to minister there before the LORD your God, or the judge, that man shall die. So you shall put away the evil from Israel (Deuteronomy 17:8-12).

This is the very principle upon which Matthew 18 is based. Christ would build His Church and give the keys of binding and loosening to those He placed in positions of authority (Mat. 16:19; 1Cor. 12:18).

In this context, we must never forget that the process of resolving conflicts begins in private. If the other refuses to listen, we are to take one or two witnesses and make a second attempt to resolve the matter—again, in private. We must not spread any details of our conflict throughout the congregation. Neither should we strive to influence those who might judge the matter at a later point. We must also refrain from running to the pastor and telling him our view before our offender has a chance to explain their side. The reason for this is a person tends to believe the side of the story they are told first. As a proverb relates:

The first *one* to plead his cause *seems* right, until his neighbor comes and examines him (Proverbs 18:17).

Even though these Scriptures are clear and simple, many have disregarded Christ's instructions. Rarely are the first steps toward reconciliation followed. Some have even gone outside the Church to civil courts for judgment. The Apostle Paul clearly objected to this, saying:

Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? ...I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers! Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather *let yourselves* be cheated? (1 Corinthians 6:1-7).

While there may be times when going to a civil court is unavoidable, Christians should not go to the judicial system in this world to resolve conflicts among brethren. Instead, if satisfaction is not attained by applying the first two steps in Christ's reconciliation process, we should go to the local minister, and explain that we have an issue needing an ordained mediator. We explain that we went to the person alone. We tell them that we had taken witnesses, and there is a need for a hearing in which we, the accused, and any witnesses may testify.

Those judging a matter must not have a predisposition or any part in the conflict. If they do, the Church leader should disqualify himself as a judge. Then, when all has been done God's way, the following is a sacred truth of the Almighty:

Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven (Matthew 18:18).

In other words, when it is necessary to take our issue to the Church, we must agree to abide by their decision—like it or not. If all has been done correctly, we can be confident that God

will be in the resolution. Even if we do not receive the judgment we desire, we are bound by the decision. The Messiah emphasized that, when we follow His system, He will be in the judgment. As He stated:

Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, **I am there in the midst of them** (Matthew 18:19-20).

### ***Two or Three Gathered Together***

Many believe that Christ's words, "where two or three are gathered together in My name," are referring to a worship service. This is not the case. Although two or three people meeting for a Church service may be legitimate, the truth is, when it is not possible or practical to attend with other brethren, one person alone can keep the Sabbath and faithfully worship God. While the Scriptures refer to the Sabbath as "a holy convocation," these terms do not mean that we must meet with a specific number of individuals. Meeting with others does not make our service holy. The primary meaning of these terms is that, on the Sabbath, we are to convoke with the holy God.

When we honestly consider the context of Christ's words, it is clear that He was speaking about decisions made by elders placed in positions of authority within the Church. The Messiah stated that if two or more Church leaders agree, "it will be done for them by My Father in heaven." This statement has immense significance and is another part of God's instruction that has seldom been followed.

For Matthew 18 to be binding, two or more Church leaders must hear the testimony of the individuals involved, as well as the witnesses, and then make a decision. The decision cannot be made by a single man alone! Two or more elders, pastors, or evangelists **MUST** agree! Once a decision has been made, both parties in the conflict must abide by the judgment. If one or more of the individuals do not accept the resolution, it is a deliberate act of disobedience—one that severs their

relationship to both God and His Church. This is what the Messiah meant when He said, “if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen...” (Mat. 18:17).

Tragically, Christ’s commanded instructions for reconciliation have been ignored, misused, and abused more often than not. Having the offended party go alone to the offender has seldom been taught, and followed even less. Rarely have people privately taken witnesses in a second attempt, and proper hearings have seldom been held. Too often brethren have gone straight to the ministry with offenses and allowed a single pastor to make judgments that may affect people for the rest of their lives. We have allowed ministers to act alone as if they were lords over fiefdoms rather than shepherds of God’s people.

Pastors have sometimes allowed friends to influence them against others. Occasionally, a member in a conflict with a pastor has simply been disfellowshipped. Moreover, if a Church leader decided to excommunicate a person without following Christ’s instructions, there has rarely been recourse for the member. Pastors have acted autonomously, and headquarters often refused to reconsider the pastor’s decision. This approach left no way to contest what may have been a misjudgment.

Not following the proper steps explained by Christ clearly reflects an ugly truth. Many do not have sufficient love for others. This lack of brotherly love naturally reflects deficient love for Christ and the Father. Further, by not following Matthew 18 as prescribed, we sin and hurt numerous people. Although there may be some who do not think this an important issue, the Scriptures tell us it is enormously important to God. As Christ stated:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35).

### ***Legitimate Decisions***

God has given us a system of resolving conflicts among brethren, and the following truth cannot be emphasized enough. If these steps are not followed, God does not promise to bind that decision. God's law does not allow a single minister to disfellowship someone without the testimony of witnesses, and without the agreement of two or more elders who have no personal stake in the conflict.

For example, when the apostle Paul put a man out of the Church, there was testimony from the elders who were witnesses in Corinth. The young man's sin was commonly reported. The elders wrote to Paul and God's apostle seconded their judgment (1Cor. 5:1-7).

The Scriptures strongly indict ministers who take it upon themselves to make such judgments based on a single opinion. Consider the example of Diotrophese. He had no problem casting true brethren out of the church without witnesses or a hearing. As John wrote:

I wrote to the church, but Diotrophes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting *them* out of the church (3 John 9-10).

To prevent this kind of injustice, Christ gave us steps to take when dealing with conflicts among brethren. We must follow those steps. If we do not, we are violating Christ's command, and doing so often results in a judgment that is not binding according to God.

If a pastor does not follow Christ's system of reconciling conflict, it may result in misjudgment. Violating Christ's commands would nullify any misjudgment and God would not acknowledge an unjust conclusion. However, we must be careful not to fool ourselves. Just because a minister did not use Christ's system does not mean that every decision outside of

Christ's method is invalid. We must be honest and look at the issue from God's perspective.

For example, what if a single minister made a decision against us? What if our brother did not come to us alone and there were no witnesses or hearing? Yet, in our heart, we knew that we were wrong and the judgment was actually correct? Does the minister's error by not using Christ's method disannul the verdict we know was right? That would be impossible. Some things are self-evident. The truth is always the truth whether we follow the correct steps to reach the conclusion or not.

Thus, we can dismiss a false judgment against us if we were in the right, and the minister wrongly applied Matthew 18. But, we cannot justify dismissing a judgment if we were in the wrong. The ancient adage that two wrongs do not make a right is true. If a false judgment was entered against us, it is not binding. But if the judgment was accurate, even though a mistake may have been made in the proceedings, the judgment stands and we are bound to it.

### ***A Biblical Example***

Christ's steps toward reconciliation are exactly what the first era of the New Testament Church followed. Acts 15 documents a case that required a hearing by the Church. This matter had its origin in the teaching of some of the Jews. Friends of James were convinced that gentiles desiring to become Christians must first become Jews through circumcision of the flesh. When Paul visited Antioch, he found that even Peter and Barnabas had been affected by the Jews discrimination of gentiles. Paul found it necessary to confront Peter on the matter:

Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was

carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before *them* all, “If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?” (Galatians 2:11-14).

This became a conflict that involved elders in the Church. There were many witnesses who could testify regarding what had occurred. Because this was a conflict involving more than one congregation, they took it to headquarters in Jerusalem. As Luke wrote:

And certain *men* came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question (Acts 15:1-2).

This matter involved the entire Church, but Paul did not take the conflict before the entire Church. It was first discussed by the leaders. When an agreement could not be reached, this conflict was taken to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. Witnesses who taught that circumcision was necessary were comprised of Pharisaic members who gave their testimony in the hearing:

But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5).

Again, notice that this issue was not taken before the entire Church. There was no vote by the lay members on the matter. It was decided by the apostles and elders:

Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter (Acts 15:6).

The apostles and elders did not argue this privately and then decide. It was a hearing open to all those personally involved. There were witnesses on both sides, and they discussed the various points openly:

And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: “Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as *He did* to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:7-9).

After presenting their points for and against, Peter stood up and spoke. He reminded the Church leaders that God originally revealed to him that uncircumcised gentiles were to be accepted into the Church (Acts 10:9-16). The Jews looked upon gentiles as if they were unclean animals. By Peter’s vision, the Eternal made it clear that God had cleansed those gentiles who were converted (Acts 10:28, 11:1-18). After Peter’s statement, Paul and Barnabas took their turn testifying:

Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles (Acts 15:12).

After the testimony of these witnesses, James affirmed the facts presented by Peter, Barnabas, and Paul:

And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, “Men *and* brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this

the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written. ‘After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up; so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who are called by my name,’ says the Lord who does all these things” (Acts 15:13-17).

Notice that two or more leaders agreed—just as Christ had commanded. Further, these men did not make a decision based on human judgment. They did not change what God had already said. Instead, they based their judgment on God’s existing word and even quoted Amos 9:11-12 as a Scriptural basis for their decision. James then declared:

“Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, *from* sexual immorality, *from* things strangled, and *from* blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.” Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, *namely*, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. They wrote this *letter* by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, “*You must* be circumcised and keep the law”—to whom we gave no *such* commandment—it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed

good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter (Acts 15:19-30).

Acts 15 is a slice of history regarding how Church conflicts should be handled. Church leaders first confronted the disagreement. Then they held a hearing in which they listened to testimony from witnesses on both sides of the issue. The apostles and elders now sat in Moses' seat. Only then was a decision made by two or more, and it was supported by God's Word. This is our example. Because it was done God's way, Christ was in the decision. He inspired their judgment; it was bound in heaven and it pleased the entire Church (Acts 15:22).

### ***The Lesson for Us***

God has shown us the way to deal with offenses and conflicts. But what was His purpose in revealing this system to us? Was it to enable a person to force the other to agree with them? Was it to get our own way or to get the other person in some sort of trouble? Is Matthew 18 to be used as a method of revenge? Absolutely not!

The entire reason for using this method is to enable those in God's family to peaceably reconcile their differences. It is to maintain fellowship with one another, and retain the bond of unity we have in Christ. When brethren do not follow Christ's command, people get hurt. Such injuries are difficult to heal and some may end up emotionally scarred for life.

A story illustrates the pain of a relationship that was not reconciled. Elizabeth Barret Browning desired to maintain a connection with her parents, but with hardness of heart they consistently refused her:

In her youth, Elizabeth had been watched over by her tyrannical father. When she and Robert were married, their wedding was held in secret because of her father's disapproval. After the wedding the Brownings sailed for Italy, where they lived for the rest of their lives. But even though her parents had disowned her, Elizabeth never gave up on the relationship. Almost weekly she wrote them letters. Not once did they reply. After 10 years, she received a large box in the mail. Inside, Elizabeth found all of her letters; not one had been opened! Today those letters are among the most beautiful in classical English literature. Had her parents only read a few of them, their relationship with Elizabeth might have been restored (<https://bible.org/illustration/elizabeth-barrett-browning>, retr. 3/16/2015).

Disjointed relationships will not exist in the Kingdom of God. Christ is building a family that always loves, respects, and listens to one another. In too many cases, we have failed to communicate with others during conflicts. Consequently, some brethren have remained estranged. This is not a reflection of the love God's people are to have (John 13:35).

Love is honest, kind, and forgiving. Love does not seek revenge. Christians should have compassion, sincerely listen to one another, desire to understand, and strive to reconcile as God's begotten children. Occasional conflict and offense is unavoidable in this life. And yet our ultimate goal is to be at one with each other just as Christ and the Father are one (John 17:11).

### ***Seventy Times Seven***

Peter understood that Christ had explained God's way of resolving conflict among brethren. However, this brought up a question in his mind. If the purpose for this method was reconciliation, it would be necessary to forgive the individual with whom we had a conflict. Peter wondered, exactly how many times should we forgive? Matthew recorded Christ's final comment on this subject:

Then Peter came to Him and said, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:21-22).

Christ’s answer makes everything clear. Should our brother trespass against us, our desire should always be to reconcile without limit. When he or she works to repair any damage, we must always forgive. Again, God’s desire is that we be one in mind and purpose (John 17:20-23). We must always strive to live peaceably with one another.

As long as we are human, the potential for conflict and offense continues to exist in God’s Church. There will always be the possibility of misunderstandings, disagreements, and opportunities to hurt each other. However, this presents us with another tremendous opportunity. If we deal with such conflicts the proper way, it shows God the depth of our love for Him and one another. Understanding this, we must strive to love and serve one another. When conflicts occur, we are to settle the issue with mutual respect by properly following Christ’s instructions in Matthew 18. With the true understanding of His admonition, make the commitment to reconcile any differences we might have the right way—God’s way.

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