

A HARMONY OF THE GOSPELS
XX. Christ's Instruction On Church Discipline
(Matthew 18:15-20)

I. Introduction

- A. After Jesus had addressed the issue of handling offenses, He moved on in Matthew 18:15-20 to the handling of known sin in a group of believers, what we apply to church discipline. (Bible Know. Com., N. T., p. 62)
- B. We view this passage for our insight, application and edification (as follows):

II. Christ's Instruction On Church Discipline, Matthew 18:15-20.

- A. Some offenses by believers are more than just faults but include sins that can pollute the holiness of a group of believers. A list of such sins for the Church era is given in 1 Corinthians 5:11 NIV and Titus 3:10-11 NIV and they include sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, slander, substance abuse, swindling and causing division.
- B. Thus, before the Church era, but applicable for the Church as implied in Titus 3:10 where Paul alluded to these steps, Jesus taught several actions were needed to handle negatively polluting sins in groups of believers:
 - 1. In the first step, if a believing man or woman sins by committing a group-polluting sin, a believer who knows of that other believer's sin must privately contact the sinful believer and clarify his fault that the sinful believer might confess and turn from his sin, Matthew 18:15a. The hope is that the sinning believer heeds the admonition, repents and confesses his sin, settling the issue at the private level, Matthew 18:15b.
 - 2. In the second step, if the sinning believer refuses to heed the admonition of the one believer, that believer is to take one or two other believers with him to urge the sinning believer to confess and turn from his sin, Matthew 18:16a. The presence of two or three believers align with the Deuteronomy 19:15 directive that at least two witnesses are needed to determine if an alleged guilty party is truly guilty. The implied hope is that the sinful believer will heed the group of several believers and repent and confess his sin, producing a resolution that minimizes the sinner's exposure of his sin to the general assembly of believers.
 - 3. In the third step, if the sinning believer refuses to heed these several believers, they are to take the matter to the "church," what in the immediate context of Matthew 18:17 was "the Jewish assembly," thus applicable in the later dispensation of the Church to the local church. (Bible Know. Com., N. T., loc. cit.) It then became the responsibility of the "assembly" of believers, what is today's local church, to go to the sinner and urge him to confess and turn from his sin, Matthew 18:17a.
 - 4. In the fourth step, if the sinning believer refuses to heed the "assembly" of believers, the "assembly" is to excommunicate him to protect its own holiness, Matthew 18:17b with 1 Corinthians 5:7, 13b.
 - 5. The ultimate goal of such group discipline is not to excommunicate a sinning believer, but to restore him to fellowship in the "assembly" of believers. For this reason, Paul in 2 Corinthians 2:6-11 directed that if an excommunicated believer then confessed and turned from his sin, the "assembly" of believers who had removed him from its fellowship were to welcome him back into its fellowship. A practical necessity would be for the repenting believer to meet with the "assembly" and confess his sin before it, and for the assembly to welcome him back into its fellowship by giving him the right hand of fellowship, cf. Gal. 2:9.
- C. Jesus explained the solemn authority of the "assembly" in such a case as being that which reflects on earth the decisions of God in heaven, Matthew 18:18. The phrases "shall be bound" (KJV) and "shall be loosed" (KJV) are literally rendered as "shall have been bound" and "shall have been loosed" where believers reflect God's previous same decisions. (Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, ftns. to Matthew 18:18 and Matthew 16:19)
- D. Besides the binding and loosing, the "assembly" was "also to engage in corporate prayer. Whenever they came together in the name of the Lord, He would be with them. And if two or three would agree together about anything" especially as it related to group spiritual discipline, "it would be done for them by the Father in heaven," Matthew 18:19-20; Bible Know. Com., N. T., loc. cit.)

Lesson: *When a believer in a local church commits a Biblically defined group-polluting sin, a believer who knows of that sin should go and seek to get the sinner to repent. If the sinner refuses to repent, the godly believer is to take one or two other believers to the sinful party to urge him to repent. If the sinner still refuses to repent, the two or three believers are then to take the matter to the church and the church is to urge the sinner to repent. If he does not heed the church, the sinful believer is to be excommunicated until he repents and is restored to fellowship.*

Application: *May we heed Matthew 18:15-20 and practice church discipline as directed by God with the intent of leading the sinful believer to confess his sin, to turn from it and thus to be restored to fellowship with the body.*