

# CHURCH *of* GOD

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Thank you for your study paper “An Examination of Matthew 18.”

Jesus set the tone for His instruction that is recorded in Matthew 18 by first focusing on the characteristic of humility. He taught that we must all become converted and exhibit the unpretentious and trusting qualities of a child. Certainly that kind of heart and attitude are necessary if we are to apply the principles of dealing with offenses and being forgiving, as are emphasized in the second half of the chapter.

Your study paper focuses on verse 17, when an unresolved offense must be settled by the Church, which may result in disciplinary action. While we share your concern that these matters be handled properly and that the intended result be an “environment of peace and unity” in the Church, we cannot agree with the conclusions you draw from this passage.

Jesus’ teaching and other New Testament examples show that the ministry of the Church has been granted the authority to take action when the unity of the Church is threatened by unresolved offense, sinful behavior or heresy. There is no indication that the members of the Church are directly involved in making this judgment.

- The last resort in resolving offense is to bring it to “the church.” The question is, in this context, what is meant by “the church”? Matthew 18:18 states that “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.” This indicates that “the church” refers to one who has the authority to make binding decisions.

Notice this statement on Matthew 18:18 from *Adam Clarke’s Commentary*:

The phrases to bind and to loose were Jewish, and most frequent in their writers. It belonged only to the teachers among the Jews to bind and to loose. When the Jews set any apart to be a preacher, they used these words, “Take thou liberty to teach what is bound and what is loose.”

The concept of “binding and loosing” was a familiar one in Jewish culture. In Matthew 16:13-20 Jesus established that Church leaders (beginning with Peter and the other disciples) would have that authority. There is no indication that the entire assembly or body of the Church would be involved in making binding decisions.

Similarly, *Matthew Poole’s Commentary* states:

By *the church* then must be meant those who had power to bind and loose. Now though at this time there was no particular church formed, yet there were some who had a power to bind and loose. Christ had given such a power to his apostles.

Jesus subsequently built His Church and established leadership and godly authority within its structure. Elders were to be ordained in the congregations (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). Jesus Himself instituted different responsibilities for the purpose of teaching and unifying the Church (Ephesians 4:11-13). As “overseers,” elders are responsible to care for, supervise, lead, “feed” and encourage the congregation (1 Peter 5:2; John 21:15-21; 2 Corinthians 1:24). While it’s obvious that Jesus expects His ministers to make disciplinary decisions judiciously, righteously and carefully, there is no scriptural injunction for an elder to consult with the congregation when making such a decision.

In ancient Israel, leaders and rulers were chosen by Moses and given authority to make fair and righteous judgments (Exodus 18:21-22; Deuteronomy 1:16-17). Matters that were too difficult for judges to resolve were to be taken “up” to Moses for his decision, not “down” to the congregation of Israel.

- We don’t agree with your analysis of the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira as examples of “binding decisions” that were “made public and made *in public*.” Obviously they died in a public place—in the presence of Peter and others. But it was not the result of a “binding decision” made by Peter and announced publicly to the Church. In fact, their deaths were not Peter’s ruling. The judgment made in public and carried out publicly was by the hand of God. His sentence upon them was witnessed by a few and then spread to “all the church.” There is no justification in this account for a matter to be decided by or fully explained to the entire Church.
- Paul’s decision to remove an adulterous man from the fellowship of the Church was made based on reports he had received. Everyone in the congregation already knew about the situation; in fact, they were proud of their own tolerance (1 Corinthians 5:1-2). There is no precedent here for explaining in detail to members of the congregation the rationale or circumstances of a member’s discipline.

In 1 Corinthians 4:18-21 it is clear that Paul, not members of the congregation, had the “power” or authority to judge the situation. And he warned them that he would do just that.

- When this same man repented, Paul made the decision that he ought to be reinstated (2 Corinthians 2:5-11). Paul pointed out that he had made the initial decision to remove the man from fellowship on his own authority and that they were compelled to obey (not discuss or debate) his judgment. He stated, “For to this end I also wrote, that I might put you to the test, *whether you are obedient in all things*” (verse 9). He also emphasized that since he had forgiven the man, the congregation ought to do so as well—in other words that they should reconcile. It is clear that the entire matter was based on Paul’s authority, not a decision that had to be justified before the congregation.
- Paul instructed Timothy that part of the work of the ministry is to be forthright and decisive in dealing with any who stray from the truth (2 Timothy 4:2-5).
- That the Jewish judicial system violated Jesus’ right to fair judgment is not relevant to formal decisions made by the Church. Certainly decisions made by the Church are to be fair and must be based on God’s law, but the precedent of Jewish practice does not require that in the Church such judgments be discussed and resolved publicly.

We agree that a pastor’s disciplinary action should be made with “extreme delicacy,” which is precisely why it is not appropriate to include uninvolved individuals in the process. It isn’t accurate

to describe a minister's discreet deliberations as "concealment" or "secrecy." The importance of confidentiality in counseling and resolving conflict cannot be overemphasized. A pastor will typically seek counsel and guidance (without breeching confidentiality) from experienced pastors when making a difficult decision. As you mentioned in your paper, in Jewish culture a decision was rendered by two or three *judges*. In principle, that would mean Church elders, not two or three members of a congregation judging the pastor's decision. In COGWA a pastor does not have unilateral or absolute authority in such a circumstance. If a member feels his situation has not been judged fairly, he can appeal to the Church administration (the Ministerial Services operation manager) for further consideration.

Dealing with a serious matter privately shows respect for a person, giving him a much better opportunity to recover and repent (Proverbs 17:9; 10:12) without the onus of private mistakes being made public. If a person is no longer allowed to attend church, it won't help him or her to have details of the situation announced to the congregation. And neither is it biblical for members of the congregation to debate the decision to judge whether the pastor has acted "precisely according to God's Word."

There is no question that some have been hurt in the past. That can be difficult to sort out because, no matter how carefully and fairly discipline is administered, people will typically feel that they have been mistreated. However, adopting a nonbiblical approach would cause more confusion and division rather than preventing mistakes in the future.

Instead, we need to move forward and carefully apply scriptural instruction and principles in these situations. The Church does not condone or lightly dismiss division and controversy. However, it is part of church history from the first century on and Scripture reminds us that it will always be a challenge. Ministry and members alike are responsible to maintain the unity of the spirit (Ephesians 4:1-3).

If, after reviewing the committee's comments, you feel that your paper deserves further consideration, you may ask your pastor to notify the chairman of the Doctrine Committee to request that the paper be forwarded to the Ministerial Board of Directors. The MBOD will consider your paper, along with Ken Giese's and the Doctrine Committee's comments, and make a final decision on the validity of its content.

Whether you choose to request that the MBOD examine your paper or not, we once again thank you for your desire to contribute to the Church's biblical understanding and your willingness to work within our established processes.

Sincerely,



Don Henson,  
Chairman

On behalf of the COGWA Doctrine Committee  
John Foster  
Bruce Gore  
Don Henson  
David Johnson  
Ralph Levy