

THE MEANING OF MATTHEW 18:17B IN ITS HISTORICAL AND LITERARY  
CONTEXT AND ITS APPLICATION IN THE CHURCH TODAY

by

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## ABSTRACT

### The Meaning of Matthew 18:17b in its Historical and Literary Context and its Application in the Church Today

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This thesis examines the literary and historical context of Matthew 18:17b in order to answer the question of how Christians are to treat a person who has been excommunicated from the church. While most agree that Matthew 18:15-17a describes a process where restoration is the goal, the tendency has been to view verse 18:17b (“And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector”) as a license to abandon the person. In this thesis, I will argue that this should not be the case. Rather, we should read Jesus’ statement in light of His desire for repentance and restoration of sinners and tax collectors. The church must take seriously both its obligation to exclude the unrepentant brother and its obligation to persistently and winsomely engage with that same brother with the objective of winning him back to the church.

Chapter 1 first introduces the general topic of church discipline and some foundational concepts. Chapter 2 then presents a historical survey of excommunication, starting with possible Old Testament antecedents and concluding with modern-day approaches. Next, chapter 3 considers the meaning of Matthew 18:17b in its historical and literary contexts, including the parables surrounding Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus’ actual interactions with Gentiles and tax collectors, and other relevant biblical passages. Finally, in

light of the historical and literary context, chapter 4 critically evaluates historical and modern practices with respect to excommunication and concludes with suggestions for application in the church today.

I will argue that the literary and historical context of these verses highlights not only the exclusionary aspect of church discipline, but also the redemptive and restorative purposes behind discipline. I conclude that to treat someone “as a Gentile and a tax collector” does mean they are excluded from the benefits of membership in the covenant community. It does not, however, mean the excommunicant is beyond hope or that Christians may ignore opportunities to persuade that person to repent and be restored to the church.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Many writers and theologians have tackled the thorny question of church discipline, particularly within the last forty years.<sup>1</sup> These authors have generally bemoaned the loss of this “third mark of the church,”<sup>2</sup> argued for a renewed focus on discipline, and emphasized its manifold purposes. While these works necessarily reference the obligation found in Matthew 18:17b to treat an unrepentant brother “as a Gentile and a tax collector,” very few provide more than a superficial treatment of how exactly a believer is to treat them. And those who do attempt to provide concrete guidance on this important question do so with little or no obvious consideration of the historical and literary context of this passage.

This thesis seeks to work against such a trend by exploring the historical and literary context of Matthew 18:17b, and in doing so will try to answer the question of

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974); Marlin Jeschke, *Discipling in the Church: Recovering a Ministry of the Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1972); J. Carl Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1985); Donald J. Macnair, *Restoration God's Way* (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1987); Wyman Lewis Richardson, *Walking Together: A Congregational Reflection on Biblical Church Discipline* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007); and Daniel E. Wray, *Biblical Church Discipline* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> “The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults.” *Belgic Confession* XXIX.

how to treat a professing Christian who has been excommunicated. The literary and historical context of Matthew 18:17b reveals that excommunication was never intended as an end in itself. Rather, in light of the parables surrounding this verse and Jesus' own treatment of Gentiles and tax collectors, the church must view the excommunicated member as a mission field. A primary goal of church discipline is the repentance and restoration of the member under discipline to the church. Just as Jesus loved and sought to win over unbelievers, Christians should continue to seek the restoration of those who have been disciplined, specifically including those who have been excommunicated.

This thesis will first introduce the general topic of church discipline. It will then present a historical survey of exclusion or excommunication<sup>3</sup> in the church, starting with possible Old Testament antecedents and concluding with modern-day approaches. Next, it will examine the meaning of Matthew 18:17b in its historical and literary contexts, including the parables surrounding Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus' actual interactions with Gentiles and tax collectors, and other biblical passages and principles which arguably provide contingencies to Jesus' unqualified statement in Matthew 18:17b. I conclude that Jesus' command to treat a contumacious brother as a "Gentile and a tax collector," in its historical and literary context, conveys not only the harsh reality of exclusion from the church, but also the obligation Christians have to engage with the excluded brother, persistently and gently encouraging him to repent and be restored. Finally, in light of the historical and literary context, this thesis will critically evaluate historical and modern

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<sup>3</sup> *Excommunication* or *expulsion* generally refer to an organization's decision to remove a person from membership, whereas *exclusion* can be a broader term describing not only the person's status with respect to the organization, but also how the person is treated outside of the context of the organization. Though there is a slight difference in the meaning of these terms, the literature on the topic of discipline uses them interchangeably. Except where a different meaning is clearly evident from the context, this thesis likewise uses these terms interchangeably.

practices with respect to excommunication and suggest principles for the application of Matthew 18:17b today.

### Foundational Concepts

The precise question under consideration here falls within the general topic of “church discipline,” a basic biblical teaching which nevertheless increasingly requires careful explanation. While the church throughout history has often been inconsistent in its exercise of discipline, the church, at least in North America, has largely abandoned the practice within the last century.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, before proceeding to the question of how to treat someone “as a Gentile and a tax collector,” it is necessary to lay a foundation.

Church discipline has been broadly defined as Christians “spur[ring] one another on toward maturity by encouraging and holding each other accountable to love, seek after, and obey God with all of our hearts, souls, minds and strength, and to love others as we love ourselves.”<sup>5</sup> One way to describe this *encouraging* aspect of discipline is “formative” or “preventative” church discipline, which Jay Adams succinctly defines as “the promotion of good order and true belief.”<sup>6</sup> Warham Walker likewise described formative church discipline as “all the means to be employed for the promotion, in the

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<sup>4</sup> R. Albert Mohler, “Church Discipline: The Missing Mark,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4, no. 4 (Winter 2000); Thomas C. Oden, “Our Uniquely Undisciplined Moment,” *Christianity Today* October 2007 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/augustweb-only/130-54.0.html>; Internet; accessed 12 April 2013; and Gregory A. Wills, “Southern Baptists and Church Discipline,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4, no. 4 (Winter 2000).

<sup>5</sup> *Relational Commitments* (Billings, MT: Peacemaker Ministries, 2005), 16.

<sup>6</sup> Adams, 25. Adams also points out that “discipline” is etymologically related to the Latin words for “learning” and “to learn.”

members of a church, of a healthful, vigorous polity.”<sup>7</sup> Adams observes the difficulty, when discussing church discipline, of maintaining focus on formative discipline, because “the sensational calls attention to itself and tends to crowd out the ordinary.”<sup>8</sup> At the risk of confirming Adams’ observation, this thesis does in fact focus on the “sensational” aspect of church discipline, i.e., *corrective* discipline.

John Calvin’s characterization of discipline in Book IV of the *Institutes* emphasizes the corrective aspect: “Discipline . . . is a kind of curb to restrain and tame those who war against the doctrine of Christ, or it is a kind of stimulus by which the indifferent are aroused; sometimes, also, it is a kind of fatherly rod, by which those who have made some more grievous lapse are chastised in mercy with the meekness of the spirit of Christ.”<sup>9</sup> Similar in emphasis is Carl Laney’s definition of church discipline as “the confrontive and corrective measures taken by an individual, church leaders, or the congregation regarding a matter of sin in the life of a believer.”<sup>10</sup> These two definitions serve as useful starting points for further discussion herein.

Another term which merits early consideration is “excommunication,” helpfully defined by Wyman Richardson as “a church’s formal recognition and affirmation of the fact that a member has placed himself out of fellowship by consistent rebellion against

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<sup>7</sup> Warham Walker, *Harmony in the Church: Church Discipline* (Rochester, NY: Backus Book Publishers, 1981; reprint, Boston: Gould, Kendall and Lincoln, 1844), 25.

<sup>8</sup> Adams, 24-25.

<sup>9</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 4.12.1; p. 813.

<sup>10</sup> Laney, 14.

God and His church.”<sup>11</sup> This thesis is focused on the issue of excommunication or, more specifically, how one is treat an excommunicant, and it would be premature to provide an extensive discussion of excommunication here. For present purposes, it is worth noting, as does Martin Jeschke, that “*excommunication* is not, of course, a biblical word, but neither is its root, *communion*, or fellowship,” and is tied to “one old meaning of the term communicate—‘to receive communion.’”<sup>12</sup> Thus, the term “excommunicate” is, in general, a shorthand way to refer to exclusion of a person from the benefits of church membership, chiefly communion. This is, of course, merely one aspect or a subset of the general topic of church discipline.

Those interested in a broader study of church discipline have access to a number of valuable general books on the topic. One of these is Carl Laney’s book *A Guide to Church Discipline*. Other useful texts are Jay Adam’s *Handbook of Church Discipline* and Donald J. MacNair’s *Restoration God’s Way*. A concise and practical treatment of discipline is *Biblical Church Discipline* by Daniel Wray. Warham Walker’s book *Harmony in the Church: Church Discipline*, originally published in 1844, is an excellent general resource on this topic. There are also a number of worthwhile general articles on church discipline, including Mark Dever’s “Biblical Church Discipline”<sup>13</sup> and George B. Davis’ “Whatever Happened to Church Discipline?”<sup>14</sup> These and similar publications

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<sup>11</sup> Richardson, 95. Possible substitutes for this word include disfellowship, cast out, drop, shun, or remove from membership.

<sup>12</sup> Jeschke, 87 (italics in original).

<sup>13</sup> Mark Dever, "Biblical Church Discipline," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4 (winter 2000): 28-43. The entire winter 2000 issue of this journal was devoted to the topic of church discipline.

<sup>14</sup> George B. Davis, "Whatever Happened To Church Discipline?" *Criswell Theological Review* 1, no. 2 (1987, January 01): 345-361.

provide a background and broad treatment of church discipline which exceed the scope of this thesis.

For the sake of clarity, the reader should know that this thesis assumes the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture consistent with The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,<sup>15</sup> including the historicity of the accounts of Jesus' life and words in the Gospels. Further, this thesis is written based upon the assumption that the authors traditionally ascribed to the books of the Bible were in fact the authors; e.g., the Apostle John wrote the book of John, the Apostle Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, etc. Finally, although this thesis will necessarily delve into the biblical basis for church discipline, it assumes that the reader is generally familiar with the basic steps of discipline set forth in Matthew 18:15-20 and is convinced of the biblical warrant for and necessity of both church membership and church discipline.<sup>16</sup>

### Decline in Church Discipline

One of the challenges presented in a discussion of excommunication is the absence of context for many in the church today. As Art Azurdia accurately observes, "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

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<sup>15</sup> *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (Chicago: International Council On Biblical Inerrancy, 1978, accessed 12 April 2013); available from [www.churchcouncil.org/Reformation\\_net/COR\\_Docs/01\\_Inerrancy\\_Christian\\_Worldview.pdf](http://www.churchcouncil.org/Reformation_net/COR_Docs/01_Inerrancy_Christian_Worldview.pdf); Internet.

<sup>16</sup> For a short but persuasive call to church membership, read Joshua Harris, *Stop Dating the Church* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2004).

church discipline.”<sup>17</sup> The decline has been well documented;<sup>18</sup> the causes for the decline deserve full treatment in a separate thesis or dissertation. In some cases, the response is not merely ignorance, but rather outright hostility to a concept which is foreign to the modern culture of toleration and individualism. Laney accurately points out that some “people have come to associate church discipline with heresy hunts, witch burnings, intolerance and oppression.”<sup>19</sup> Thomas C. Oden provides some historical context:

We must recall that the historical norm for church discipline has held reasonably firm for 18 centuries, from Irenaeus to Athanasius to Augustine to Thomas Aquinas to the Reformers to the Evangelical Revival finally up to the reckless phase of accommodation to modernity. Then it comes to a full stop. The last century has seen discipline grow increasingly relativistic, flabby, ambiguous, or altogether disappear.<sup>20</sup>

Regardless of the reason for the decline, the “third mark” of the true church is largely missing, and many leaders in the church seemingly could not care less. John Calvin would say these leaders have taken “aim at the complete devastation of the church.”<sup>21</sup>

### Necessity and Purposes of Church Discipline

As to the importance of discipline, Jay Quine’s conclusion is worth considering:

Many passages in Scripture call for discipline of erring church members. These passages lead to the inevitable conclusion that church discipline is as much the function of a local church as the preaching of the “pure doctrine of the gospel,” and

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<sup>17</sup> Art Azurdia, "Recovering the Third Mark of the Church," *Reformation & Revival* 3, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 61.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., Gregory A. Wills, "A Historical Analysis Of Church Discipline," in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2012), 131-55.

<sup>19</sup> Laney, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Oden.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, 4.12.1; p. 813.

“the administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ.” Discipline in the church is not optional but mandatory—it is an absolute necessity if we are . . . to be obedient to the Scriptures.<sup>22</sup>

The 1561 Belgic Confession,<sup>23</sup> cited by Quine, and the 1560 Scots Confession<sup>24</sup> both list church discipline as one of the three *marks* of the true church, a concept of great significance to the Reformers. Speaking of the importance of discipline, Calvin stated, “all who either wish that discipline were abolished, or who impede the restoration of it, whether they do this of design or through thoughtlessness, certainly aim at the complete devastation of the church.”<sup>25</sup>

On the question of the purposes of discipline, George Davis provides a thorough and yet concise list: “church discipline seeks to accomplish at least seven positive and specific objectives, namely: (1) to glorify and honor God, (2) to reclaim the wayward member, (3) to protect the rest of the church, (4) to maintain the reputation of the church, (5) to deter others from sin, (6) to prevent the judgment of God, and (7) to help maintain a regenerate church membership.”<sup>26</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith similarly states that church censures, including excommunication, are “for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offenses, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might

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<sup>22</sup> Jay A. Quine, "Court Involvement in Church Discipline," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149, no. 593 (Jan. 1992): 61 (citing to the *Belgic Confession* and Don Baker, *Beyond Forgiveness: The Healing Touch of Discipline* [Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1984], 33).

<sup>23</sup> *Belgic Confession* XXIX.

<sup>24</sup> *The Scots Confession* 18.

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, 4.12.1; p. 813.

<sup>26</sup> Davis, 352.

justly fall upon the church, if they should suffer his covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.”<sup>27</sup>

### Significance of Matthew 18:15-20

Any discussion of church discipline must devote substantial attention to the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20, the church’s primary “commission” to undertake this arduous and difficult work. This passage reads:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.<sup>28</sup>

Laney describes this passage as presenting “four basic steps to correction.”<sup>29</sup> Adams concurs, but would add the implied initial step of “self-discipline.”<sup>30</sup> While the remainder of the New Testament, and particularly the letters of Paul, provide additional guidance in this area, there can be no doubt that these instructions are seminal. They set

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<sup>27</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* XXX. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Scripture references herein will be to the English Standard Version.

<sup>29</sup> Laney also addresses the debate about whether "against you" is part of the original Greek text in Matthew 18:15, concluding that it was likely original. However, that fact does not restrict the application of this passage to private disputes between Christians. Other verses, such as the parallel passage of Luke 17:3 ("If your brother sins, rebuke him") and Galatians 6:1 ("if anyone is caught in a transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness"), clearly lack such a limitation. These verses and Matthew 18:15-20 call upon Christians to confront one another about sin, regardless of whether they are personally wronged. Laney, 48-49. See also Luke C. Lee, "Church Discipline as Taught by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20," (M.A. Thesis, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1991), 15-20 Theological Research Exchange Network (002-0544).

<sup>30</sup> Adams, 28-29.

forth the church's authority to discipline, describe the discipline process in detail, and, central to the inquiry of this thesis, instruct Christians on how to relate to one who refuses to listen to the church.

### The Importance of the Question Being Addressed

The last, critical step in Jesus' instructions on church discipline calls upon Christians to treat a contumacious brother or sister "as a Gentile and a tax collector," a step which has historically been referred to as excommunication. Jesus' audience would have assumed they understood His meaning, though they, like modern Christians, would likely have struggled to reconcile these instructions with the ways in which Jesus Himself treated Gentiles and tax collectors. After all, it was a former tax collector, the Apostle Matthew, who recorded these very words in Matthew 18. As will be evident from the following historical survey of excommunication practices in the church, there has been a good bit of confusion on this issue. Nevertheless, even if men like Carl Laney, Daniel Wray, John Calvin, John Owen and many others are only half right about the weighty purposes behind church discipline, it is essential the church get this issue right.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORICAL SURVEY OF EXCOMMUNICATION

Thomas Oden asserts that “the historical norm for church discipline has held reasonably firm for 18 centuries” before coming to a “complete stop” in the last century.<sup>1</sup> “Reasonably firm” does not mean discipline was practiced perfectly or even consistently in those 18 centuries, an observation supported by history. As Gregory Wills, an expert on the history of discipline in the church, concludes, “throughout Christian history the practice of church discipline has been difficult, and the church has struggled to maintain it.”<sup>2</sup> Wills’ conclusion would certainly, perhaps even emphatically, include the church’s practices with respect to excommunication. While the fact of inconsistent discipline over the course of church history is lamentable, that does not mean the ways in which the church historically practiced discipline, including excommunication, was completely in error. Indeed, given the working of the Holy Spirit in the church over time, it is assumed there is still much to learn from previous practices, including God’s work in His people before the time of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas C. Oden, "Our Uniquely Undisciplined Moment," *Christianity Today* October 2007 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/augustweb-only/130-54.0.html>; Internet; accessed 12 April 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory A. Wills, "A Historical Analysis Of Church Discipline," in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2012), 31.

### Excommunication before the Time of Christ

It is undisputed and thus unnecessary to document the historical fact that Christianity grew from the foundation of Judaism.<sup>3</sup> That connection, however, too often leads to assumptions that various New Testament instructions and principles *must* be directly related to the Old Testament or have arisen from the practices of the Jewish community. While there are undoubtedly a great many connections, there is no reason to assume an automatic relationship between Old Testament norms and the instructions of Jesus—as evident, for example, in the clash between Paul and the Judaizers recorded in Acts 15. As to the question addressed in this thesis, W.D. Davies and Dale Allison carefully examine the Old Testament and Jewish literature to determine whether there is a connection between Matthew 18:15-17 and Jewish practices. Though they do not specifically address the issue of expulsion or exclusion, they conclude: “One cannot . . . doubt that Matthew 18:15-17 has a long pre-history in Judaism and must have been composed by an individual heavily influenced by Jewish tradition.”<sup>4</sup>

But what is that Jewish tradition? For purposes of this thesis, there are two significant windows into the practice of discipline by God’s people before the time of Christ: the time period from the Exodus through the prophecies of Malachi (the Old Testament period), and the time period starting after Malachi and lasting until the birth of Christ (the intertestamental period). An inquiry into Old Testament discipline is highly significant; to see God’s hand of discipline in the Old Testament is to obtain a glimpse of

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<sup>3</sup> Even the person who believes Paul invented Christianity would have to concede that Paul was a Jew and that many Jewish concepts are contained in his writings.

<sup>4</sup> W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *International Critical Commentary*, ed. J.A. Emerton, C.E.B. Cranfield, and G.N. Stanton, vol. II, *Matthew 8-18*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 786. As implied by their choice of words, Davies and Allison are not necessarily convinced of Matthean authorship.

His purposes behind discipline then and now, glorifying Himself by, *inter alia*, “advanc[ing] all the elect to an exceeding pitch of glory, such as eye has not seen.”<sup>5</sup> An inquiry into intertestamental period discipline practices, though important, is of much less significance for determining appropriate norms. While Scripture provides fairly clear insight into God’s plan for discipline in the Old Testament period, the rules developed by the Jewish community during the intertestamental period were not given by God and were regularly in fact condemned by Jesus. The primary value in the analysis of intertestamental period discipline is the insight it can provide into how Jesus’ audience would have understood Matthew 18:17b.

#### Old Testament Excommunication

Discipline certainly existed in the Old Testament, whether imposed directly by the hand of God (e.g., Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10, Uzzah in 2 Samuel 6, and Jereboam in 2 Chronicles 13) or through the actions of the community at God’s explicit direction (e.g., adulterers in Leviticus 20, false prophets in Deuteronomy 13, and Jezebel in 2 Kings 9). Verlynn Verbrugge describes “two strands” of discipline in the Old Testament: (1) before the exile, death as punishment in “five major areas of deviation from the laws of God;” and (2) after the exile, “separation from the community of Israel without the accompanying death motif or removal from the book of life . . . [where] the opportunity was given for repentance and restoration.”<sup>6</sup> He believes those five major areas are “those

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1774), 24 (available at <http://archive.org/details/workofredemp00edwauoft>).

<sup>6</sup> Verlyn D. Verbrugge, "The Roots of Church Discipline: Israelite and Jewish Practice," *The Reformed Journal* 30, no. 5 (1980, May 1): 18.

who worshipped false gods, engaged in serious ritual offenses, practiced certain sexual impurities, committed social crimes (murder, disrespect of parents, kidnapping), or scorned Yahweh through blasphemy.”<sup>7</sup> As indicated in the brief list of Scriptural examples above, the first strand is definitely present at least from the time of Moses up to the point of the Babylonian exile.<sup>8</sup>

But, is Verbrugge correct in concluding that the Old Testament reflects the imposition of a penalty less severe than execution, i.e., exclusion from the religious community, in the post-exilic age? Verbrugge cites to Ezra 10:7-8 and Nehemiah 13:3 as primary authority for the idea of his second strand in Old Testament discipline. In fact, Nehemiah 13:3 does describe the exclusion of foreigners “from Israel,” while Ezra 10:7-8 states that those returned exiles who did not assemble in Jerusalem as ordered by the officials and elders would be “banned from the congregation of the exiles.” William Horbury concurs with Verbrugge in arguing that “the practice of excommunication is mentioned in Isaiah, and clearly described in Ezra and Nehemiah.”<sup>9</sup> Horbury relies upon the same Ezra and Nehemiah passages as Verbrugge, and is presumably referring to the passage in Isaiah 66:5, which describes “brothers who hate you and cast you out for my name’s sake.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the Scriptural evidence does support Verbrugge’s assertion that the Old Testament does show the post-exilic community practicing exclusion.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> While not the equivalent of excommunication, persons declared unclean in such passages as Leviticus 17:15 are arguably temporarily excluded from the community.

<sup>9</sup> William Horbury, "Extirpation and Excommunication," *Vetus Testamentum* XXXV (1985): 24.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

## Expulsion or Excommunication in the Intertestamental Period

According to Horbury, “In post-exilic Jewry, even after Isa. 66:5 and Ezra 10:8, excommunication is notoriously hard to document.”<sup>11</sup> Horbury, Verbrugge and other historians focused on this issue consequently tend to refer to the discipline practices of Qumran community, the Essenes or the rabbinical material contained in the Talmud. However, as to the expulsion practices of the Essenes and Qumran community, Horbury wisely asks whether “in each case . . . the custom does not reflect the exclusiveness of a close-knit minority group, rather than the practice of post-exilic Jewry as a whole.”<sup>12</sup> And, as to the rabbinical material, Verbrugge accurately notes that the Talmud’s forms of discipline “existed only in their initial developmental stage during the New Testament era, taking their final shape only in the third century.”<sup>13</sup> Verbrugge also points out that, “Scholars have been able to detect in rabbinic literature only seven [documented] cases of expulsion prior to A.D. 70; in each case, the expulsion was only out of the sect of the Pharisees, not the Jewish community as a whole, and the reasons were basically for failure to go along with their official adopted version of the tradition.”<sup>14</sup> Perhaps this is

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<sup>11</sup> Horbury, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Verbrugge, 17. Freeman and Chadwick describe three grades of excommunication in the Talmud, *niddin*, *cherem*, and *shammatha*, increasing in severity from temporary dissociation to complete exclusion. James M. Freeman and Harold J. Chadwick, *Manners & Customs of the Bible* (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos, 1998), 517-18.

<sup>14</sup> Verbrugge, 17.

why Verbrugge concludes “that there is no continuous line of development” from discipline in the Old Testament community to the New Testament church.<sup>15</sup>

Fortunately, *little* evidence does not mean *no* evidence. Thomas Schmidt provides a helpful summary of the evidence that does exist regarding community discipline in this period:

Systems of discipline developed during the intertestamental period as reform movements among the Jews, who developed ways to establish and regulate the boundaries between themselves and outsiders. The Qumran sectaries developed an elaborate system of penalties intended to safeguard the purity and order of the community. This included a formal reproof procedure, short-term reduction of food allowance, exclusion from ritual meals, and permanent exclusion. Rabbinic traditions suggest that the Pharisees commonly imposed a “ban,” a temporary state of social isolation imposed for deviation from ritual purity laws or for heretical views and designed to recall the offender to full participation in the community.<sup>16</sup>

Bridget Illian builds the case for practices parallel to Matthew 18:15-17 among the rabbinic community and Essenes, stating that “expulsion was a discipline of last resort in other communities, too, including early rabbinic Judaism [and] the Essenes.”<sup>17</sup> Perhaps one factor in the practice of expulsion by Jews in this period was the degree of autonomy afforded to local and national Jewish leaders by the Romans and earlier conquerors. The Jews were forced (as it were) to dance to someone else’s tune for a large part of this time period.

While blindly reading Talmudic exclusionary practices back into first century Judaism is a mistake, it is equally erroneous to conclude that those practices developed in

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. The discussion of *aposynagōgos* below provides some evidence that Verbrugge’s conclusion is overstated.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas E. Schmidt, *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, electronic ed., s.v. “Discipline.” Logos Library System (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Bridget Illian, “Church Discipline and Forgiveness in Matthew 18:15-35,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37 (December 2010): 448.

a vacuum and without reference to the practices of post-exilic Jews. Further, the practices of the Essenes and Qumran communities, though not necessarily reflective of universal practices among the Jews in the first century, reveal an environment where exclusion from the religious community was a commonly-understood concept, even if not uniformly practiced. Horbury provides a thorough and detailed analysis of the concept of exclusion from the time of Moses through the time of Ezra and into the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple pre-rabbinical period. Despite his initial reservations (and counter to Verbrugge), Horbury concludes: “The evidence for excommunication from the general Jewish body in the pre-rabbinic period is not plentiful, but it is enough to suggest the existence of a recognized custom.”<sup>18</sup> This evidence, of course, provides significant historical context for understanding how Jesus’ audience would have understood His statement in Matthew 18:17b.

### Development of the Synagogue

The most significant aspect of expulsion from the Jewish community was exclusion from the synagogue, an institution which arose as the focal point of Jewish life during the intertestamental period. According to Charles Pfeiffer, “the first synagogues were established during the time of Babylonian exile.”<sup>19</sup> This is not a controversial proposition, and seems uniformly supported by all those who have studied the

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<sup>18</sup> Horbury, 38. Horbury, more specifically, states, “as Septuagintal usage . . . confirms, a line can be traced between post-exilic *hērem* and the synagogue ban, and its course runs through covenantal contexts.” *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>19</sup> Charles F. Pfeiffer, *Between the Testaments* (Bowling Green, KY: Guardian of Truth Foundation, 1959), 58.

development of the synagogue. Howard Clark Kee, who has written extensively in this area, summarizes the synagogue's development as follows:

A major development within Judaism that probably began during the period of Jewish exile in Babylon—when there was no longer the possibility of worshipping God in the Jerusalem temple—was the emergence of groups of pious Jews who gathered to engage in reading and application of the Jewish scriptures to their common life in the new circumstances. After the return of most Jews from the exile, . . . the Jerusalem temple was rebuilt, but it appears that the practice of the pious to meet for study and worship continued to be a significant feature of postexilic Judaism. These gatherings—in the Greek, *synagogai*—seem to have taken place in homes or in whatever public space was available for groups to assemble.<sup>20</sup>

Kee also makes the point that the dominant meaning of *synagōgē* is “assembly” or “meeting,” and contends, based upon this language and archaeological evidence, that the “development of synagogues as distinctive buildings was a constructive response to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in 66-70 C.E.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, as Kee, Horsley and others emphasize, *synagōgē* refers to a gathering of Jews, whether in a house or public space and not, at least in the first century, typically in a dedicated building.<sup>22</sup>

Importantly for this thesis, the synagogue was not only the center for religious activity in a Jewish community, but also the center for much of the community's social

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<sup>20</sup> Howard Clark Kee, *The Beginnings of Christianity: An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2005), 27.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Shaye Cohen suggests the English "synagogue" is narrower than the Greek *synagōgē*. While that may be true in terms of modern usage, this thesis will use the two words interchangeably. Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Were Pharisees and Rabbis the Leaders of Communal Prayer and Torah Study in Antiquity?" in *Evolution of the Synagogue: Problems and Progress*, ed. Howard Clark Kee and Lynn H. Cohick (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 91.

<sup>22</sup> Richard A. Horsley, "Synagogues in Galilee and the Gospels," in *Evolution of the Synagogue: Problems and Progress*, ed. Howard Clark Kee and Lynn H. Cohick (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 48-51. Kee does acknowledge Luke 7:5, which describes the centurion as one who “loves our nation and built our synagogue,” as the “one unambiguous reference in the New Testament to *synagōgē* as a building.” Howard Clark Kee, "Defining the First-Century C.E. Synagogue," in *Evolution of the Synagogue: Problems and Progress*, ed. Howard Clark Kee and Lynn H. Cohick (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 16.

interaction. As Richard Horsely observes, “in the first-century diaspora, *synagōgē* usually referred to a local assembly with sociopolitical as well as religious functions . . . [and] were clearly more than a worshipping group. They were socioethnic, even quasi-political, communities of Jews resident in a particular city attempting to run their own affairs insofar as the imperial and civic authorities would allow.”<sup>23</sup> Cohen agrees, stating: “Jews gathering for judicial, communal, or political purposes likely gathered in the same places in which they would have gathered for the sake of communal prayer or Torah study, but we must recognize the range of social activities that took place in a *sunagōgē*.”<sup>24</sup>

### Leadership of the Synagogue

According to Jo-Ann Brandt, “earlier commentaries treated the Pharisees as an organized body capable of promulgating and enforcing a ruling that whoever confessed Jesus to be the messiah would be expelled from the synagogue just as one is excommunicated or banned from the church.”<sup>25</sup> As implied in Brandt’s observation, many historians now generally believe “there is little evidence to suggest that the synagogue was the special sphere of Pharisaic activity and influence.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, the leaders of the community (and so the synagogue) were neither the Pharisees nor their

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<sup>23</sup> Horsley, 50-51.

<sup>24</sup> Cohen, 91.

<sup>25</sup> Jo-Ann Brandt, *Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament*, John, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 166.

<sup>26</sup> John S. Kloppenborg, "Disaffiliation in Associations and the *Aposynogōgos* of John," *HTS Theological Studies* 67, no. 1 (June 7, 2011): 1. However, Kloppenborg also concedes that little is known “about the precise social dynamics that occurred in synagogues in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.” *Ibid.*, 6.

spiritual successors the rabbis, “who did not come to control the synagogues until much later, perhaps the seventh century C.E.”<sup>27</sup> Rather, they were “drawn from the local community membership.”<sup>28</sup> According to Pfeiffer, synagogues were governed by a council of elected elders called the sanhedrin; the sanhedrin in Jerusalem, presided over by the High Priest, was known as the Great Sanhedrin.<sup>29</sup> These observations help us to understand the practice and significance of expulsion from the synagogue, up to and including the time of Jesus.

### Aposynagōgos in the Gospel of John

Many capable theologians and historians have studied and written about the Gospel of John, including its background, purposes, themes and authorship.<sup>30</sup> For present purposes, it is sufficient to note that one of themes in John (and also in the synoptic Gospels) is the tension which existed between the Jews, generally meaning the Jewish leaders, and Jesus. That tension appears in various episodes recorded by John, including the aftermath of Jesus’ healing of a blind man in John 9. The relevant portion of that passage reads:

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. But how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." (His parents said these things because they

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<sup>27</sup> Horsley, 62.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Pfeiffer, 60.

<sup>30</sup> E.g., Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1990).

feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be *put out of the synagogue*.) Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."<sup>31</sup>

Of particular interest is the phrase "put out of the synagogue" or *aposynagōgos*, "literally, lest they should become out-of-the-*sunagōge*."<sup>32</sup> This phrase appears here, John 12:42, John 16:2 and nowhere else in the Bible.<sup>33</sup> The practice of exclusion from the synagogue during the lifetime of Jesus provides a key insight into what Jesus' audience understood his meaning to be in Matthew 18:17b and how that verse should be applied in the church.

Interestingly, John 9:13-34 references both "the Pharisees" and "the Jews" as those who interrogate the formerly blind man and his parents, but the context makes it clear the two terms are used in this passage interchangeably. Of importance to this thesis is 9:22, which states that "the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue."<sup>34</sup> If John intends to communicate that *the Pharisees* had agreed to expel persons from the synagogue and the Pharisees in fact lacked that authority, is John mistaken?<sup>35</sup> Is there a way to reconcile

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<sup>31</sup> John 9:18-23 (ESV) (emphasis added).

<sup>32</sup> Cohen, 99. The Greek word transliterated into the English "synagogue" appears in this thesis with different spellings. These differences are related to the word's grammatical context, such as case.

<sup>33</sup> John 12:42 describes those who believed in Christ, "but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue." In 16:2, Jesus warns his disciples that they will be put out of the synagogues. The key *aposynagōgos* passage is clearly John 9, and neither 12:42 nor 16:2 adds to the analysis of this concept.

<sup>34</sup> The least difficult logical step to make here is the notion that the Jewish leaders would have wanted to expel any who confess Jesus as Messiah, a proposition amply demonstrated throughout the life and death of Jesus and the subsequent Jewish persecution of the early Christians. As D. Neale has demonstrated, the Jewish leaders considered Jesus to be a *mesith*, one who leads the people astray (John 7:12). D. Neale, "Was Jesus A *Mesith*? Public Response to Jesus and His Ministry," *Tyndale Bulletin* 44, no. 1 (1993, January 01): 89-101. See also the discussion below of the Jewish leaders' persecution of the early Christians as recorded in Acts.

<sup>35</sup> J. Louis Martyn's well-known thesis that the expulsion described in John 9:22 is a Johannine anachronism has been roundly rejected, including his argument that 9:22 is a reference to the rabbinical

John's statement with the admittedly scant information available on first century expulsion from the synagogue?

Assuming the accuracy of John 9, there are a number of plausible explanations for this apparent contradiction. One alternative is that the Pharisees, who were clearly able to exert great power in Jerusalem where this miracle occurred, had influenced the leaders of the local synagogues to expel any who claimed Jesus as Messiah. A second alternative is that the Pharisees, though not leaders of the synagogues throughout the remainder of Israel, were in fact the leaders of the synagogues in Jerusalem. A third alternative, advanced by Horsley, is that "synagogue" in 9:22 was a reference to the "assembly" in the Temple—a location over which the Pharisees clearly exercised authority.<sup>36</sup> A fourth alternative, suggested by Brandt, is that 9:22 does not necessarily reference formal excommunication because "*synagōgē* here 'connotes the Jewish community,' not a formal institutional organization, and . . . *aposynagōgos* could signify actions like those taken against Stephen or any of the punitive acts against Paul as described in 2 Cor. 11:22-29."<sup>37</sup> The first two of these alternatives seem the most likely. Regardless, the fact that reasonable explanations exist for a supposed contradiction provides further support for the basic historical accuracy and reliability of John's account.

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"ban," developed well after Jesus' death. E.g., Edward W. Klink III, "Expulsion from the Synagogue? Rethinking a Johannine Anachronism," *Tyndale Bulletin* 59, no. 1 (2008): 101-104.

<sup>36</sup> Horsley, 68 (referencing John 18:20 as an instance where "*synagōgē*" refers to the public area of the Temple).

<sup>37</sup> Brandt, 167-68 (citing to Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005], 70-71).

## The Significance of *Aposynagōgos*

What seems at first blush to be a largely irrelevant conclusion—i.e., that “synagogue” refers primarily to an assembly of Jews in first century Palestine—turns out to be quite significant for this thesis when the social dynamic of the synagogue is considered. The synagogue in first century Palestine, whether a dedicated building, home or mere public space, was clearly the center of religious *and* community activities in each town. Regardless of which leaders made the decision, a person who was put out of the synagogue was, for all practical purposes, completely deprived of all positive social interaction. This would have been particularly harsh in the typical small towns like Capernaum and Nazareth, which had an estimated population of 1,500 and 500, respectively, during the first century.<sup>38</sup> In light of this, the reaction of the parents of the formerly blind man to the threat of expulsion from the synagogue is completely understandable.

### Excommunication in Acts and the Pauline Epistles

The key passages on the question of excommunication in the Gospels are clearly Matthew 18:15-20 (our passage of interest) and the John *aposynagōgos* verses. Passages within Acts and the New Testament (particularly Pauline) epistles provide additional instruction but, with the exception of 1 Corinthians 5, little in the way of context. And, while these verses do not necessarily reflect the actual practice of the earliest Christians, they certainly reflect what the New Testament authors expected of the new converts.

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<sup>38</sup> Jonathan L. Reed, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. "Capernaum" & "Nazareth" (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000) (exported from Logos Bible Software). It may well be that the degree of exclusion varied from community to community and, perhaps, differed in practice based upon the social standing of the excluded person or his family.

## Acts

Acts contains examples of both formative discipline (e.g., Priscilla and Aquila equipping Apollos) and the first steps of Matthew 18 (e.g., Peter confronting Simon the magician). However, there are only a handful of passages relevant to the question of exclusion or excommunication from the church. Leonard Skinner and Laney consider the Lord's judgment on Ananias and Sapphira to be the first act of discipline in the early church, though Laney concedes that "the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira were the result of divine judgment rather than church discipline."<sup>39</sup> This episode certainly served some of the purposes behind discipline, including renewed fear of the Lord, enhanced unity of the church, preserved purity of the church and, paradoxically to some, increased growth in church membership.<sup>40</sup> However, aside from Peter pronouncing judgment, there is no sense here that the church or its leaders had any role in the matter. Thus, it is difficult to gain much useful insight from this passage into the practice of excommunication in the Apostolic age.

The other passages in Acts directly relevant to this thesis are ones which demonstrate the practice of exclusion and even capital punishment of Christians by the Jewish leaders. For example, Acts 6-7 relates Stephen's appearance before the "council," including the high priest, and execution by stoning in circumstances which indicates the

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<sup>39</sup> J. Carl Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1985), 105. See also Leonard S. Skinner, "Church Discipline in the Apostolic Age," (M.Div. thesis, University of Minnesota, 1951), 7-23, Theological Research Exchange Network (032-0008). Jeschke disagrees with Laney, stating, "Peter called Ananias and Sapphira to account, but there is not even the hint of a sword, gallows, firing squad, electric chair, or lethal injection as one of the possible instruments of church discipline." Marlin Jeschke, *Discipling in the Church: Recovering a Ministry of the Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1972), 86.

<sup>40</sup> Laney, 105-107.

approval and presence of the council and high priest. Acts 8:3 reports that Saul “was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” Likewise, Acts 9:1-2 states that Saul “went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”<sup>41</sup> These letters were granted, though Saul’s journey was interrupted by Jesus’ appearance to Saul on the Damascus Road.<sup>42</sup> These passages reflect the fulfillment of Jesus’ statement in John 16:2 that His followers would be put out of the synagogue and even killed.

### The Pauline Epistles

The focus here is not on all that Paul had to say about discipline or its subset, excommunication, a study deserving separate treatment.<sup>43</sup> Rather, it is to examine those passages in the Pauline epistles which give some insight into the actual practice of excommunication in the Apostolic church. This is a fine line to walk, as these epistles constitute both authoritative instruction *and* history. That line will likely be crossed occasionally in the following discussion, though hopefully the end result will be a better understanding and background of the meaning of Matthew 18:17b.

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<sup>41</sup> James Dunn provides an insightful analysis of Paul’s “zealous” persecution of the church as “a dedicated defense of Israel’s distinctiveness” consistent with the actions of Phinehas (Numbers 25:6-13) and others in the Old Testament. James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity*, 2nd ed (London: SCM Press, 2006), 158-159.

<sup>42</sup> Acts 22:5-11 (ESV).

<sup>43</sup> Likewise, a similar study could be made of discipline-related passages in the remainder of the New Testament.

1 Cor. 5:1-12 is the chief example of excommunication in the Apostolic age and one which provides the most context for Paul's instructions to the church in this area. In brief, Paul rebukes the Corinthian church for their tolerance of a member who was engaged in sexual relations with his stepmother. He instructs the church: "let him who has done this be removed from among you" (v. 2); "deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh" (v. 5); "cleanse out the old leaven" (v. 6); "not to associate with . . . or even to eat with" a sexually immoral brother (vv. 9-11); and "purge the evil person from among you" (v. 13). Interestingly, Jay Adams, in his *Handbook of Church Discipline*, connects this directly to Old Testament precedent, stating:

The removal formula used by Paul, "Get this wicked person out of your midst!" (1 Corinthians 5:13), comes from the Old Testament. It occurs six times in the Septuagint in the Book of Deuteronomy: 17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:24; 24:7. . . . Because of this link between the Old and New Testaments, it would seem that Paul is endorsing the use of this formula as a proper way of designating the act that terminates one's membership in the body. . . . It is interesting that the New Testament adoption of this formula shows the severity of the penalty of removal. In each instance from Deuteronomy cited above, the perpetrator of the crime was to be removed from the midst and put to death!<sup>44</sup>

Ted Kitchens concurs, noting that "Paul applied the Deuteronomic law of holiness to the congregation, though the means of application shifted from Old Covenant capital punishment for religio-ethical offenses to New Covenant spiritual and social punishment for the same offenses."<sup>45</sup> Likewise, Simon Kistemaker points out that the guilty party in

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<sup>44</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 84. Adams suggests a step of "withdrawing fellowship" following telling the church (18:17a) and before excommunication (18:17b). I am not persuaded this distinction is supported by the text.

<sup>45</sup> Ted G. Kitchens, "Perimeters of Corrective Discipline," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148, no. 590 (June 1991): 204 (citing F. S. Malan, "The Use of the Old Testament in 1 Corinthians," in *The Relationship between the Old and New Testament*, ed. D. Van Der Waal [Bloemfontein, South Africa: New Testament Society Of South Africa, 1981], 134-170).

1 Corinthians 5 would have been put “to death by stoning” by the Jewish community under the authority of Leviticus 20:11 and related Old Testament verses.<sup>46</sup>

Wyman Richardson believes the Bible speaks “often and clearly on the topic of church discipline.”<sup>47</sup> In support of that view, he quotes Matthew 18:15-18, 1 Corinthians 5:1-7, 12-13, and the following seven passages from Paul’s letters:

For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. (2 Cor. 2:6-8)

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. (Gal. 6:1)

Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. . . . If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. (2 Thess. 3:6, 10)

If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. (2 Thess. 3:14-15)<sup>48</sup>

By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme. (1 Tim. 1:19b)

Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels, I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. (1 Tim. 5:19-21)

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<sup>46</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, “‘Deliver This Man to Satan’ (1 Cor 5:5): A Case Study in Church Discipline,” *The Master's Seminary Journal* 3, no. 1 (1992): 35.

<sup>47</sup> Wyman Lewis Richardson, *Walking Together: A Congregational Reflection on Biblical Church Discipline* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 42-43.

<sup>48</sup> 2 John 10-11 similarly states “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.”

As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned. (Titus 3:10-11)

To Richardson's list could be added the following:

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. (Rom. 16:17-18)

Except for 2 Corinthians 2:6-8 and Galatians 6:1, each of the passages above clearly deal with a professing believer who is behaving sinfully and refusing to submit to the authority of the church.<sup>49</sup> Paul instructs the church to: keep away from the brother, have nothing to do with him, rebuke him publicly, warn him as a brother, purge him from among you, and not associate or even eat with him.<sup>50</sup> These instructions are tempered with the directive to restore him in a spirit of gentleness (Gal. 6:1) and the positive example of repentance by one so disciplined (2 Cor. 2:6-8).<sup>51</sup> Assuming the various churches obeyed Paul's instructions, these passages provide a fairly clear picture of how the church in the Apostolic Age treated the excommunicated member.

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<sup>49</sup> A great deal of ink has been spilled on the question of what sins or categories of sins are subject to discipline, a question outside the scope of this thesis. *E.g.*, Kitchens, 210-211. While that discussion has some merit, the two most important categories of sin subject to corrective discipline are: (1) the sin of contumacy—refusing to listen to the church when confronted by the church about any sinful behavior (which Calvin called "private" sins); and (2) sins of a public nature which demand a response from the church regardless of individual's willingness to listen to the church (which Calvin called "open" sins). John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 4.12.3; p. 814.

<sup>50</sup> For a thorough treatment of the significance of eating together from the time of Abraham to Jesus, see Colin D. Peters, "The Biblical Significance of Eating Together as it Relates to Church Discipline," (M.A. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1983), Theological Research Exchange Network (001-0106). Peters concludes, "Eating seems to be, in the Scriptures and in society in general, the sign of agreement or fellowship between men and between men and God. *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>51</sup> Although scholars are divided on the question, a significant number believe 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 reports this man's repentance and return to the church. Laney, 92. In any event, that passage reports the repentance of *someone* following "punishment by the majority"—in itself an indicator that church discipline had been applied.

Interestingly, though Paul presumably had the authority as an Apostle to excommunicate, he directed *the church* to exclude the sexually immoral man in 1 Corinthians 5 when they were “assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus” (v. 4). With the possible exception of 1 Timothy 1:19b, there are no clear indications that Paul ignored either the authority of the local church in discipline or the steps of Matthew 18. Indeed, the opposite is presumed to be the case, i.e., that Paul would neither have taught nor acted in a manner contrary to the clear teaching of Jesus.

### Excommunication in the Post-Apostolic Early Church

It is but a short jump from the Apostolic Age to the age of the post-Apostolic early church, chiefly distinguished by the fact that the church’s activities in the Apostolic Age are, at least to some degree, recorded in the Scripture.<sup>52</sup> Gregory Wills provides a thorough review of the early church’s treatment of excommunicants, pulling from the works of Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Irenaeus. In brief, those who failed to live as Christ commanded in the second century were excluded from the Lord’s Supper; presbyters announced disciplinary judgments on the Lord’s Day; and the recipients were “banished from all share in our prayer, our assembly, and all holy intercourse.”<sup>53</sup> The church distinguished between the “first repentance” at conversion and baptism, and subsequent repentances which occurred whenever a Christian sinned. Some taught that a second repentance was impossible, a view popularized by the allegorical tale *Shepherd of Hermas*, but most believed there was “no formal limit on the

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<sup>52</sup> The early church period, for purposes of this thesis, is roughly from the death of the Apostles until the end of the fourth century.

<sup>53</sup> Wills, “Historical Analysis,” 132-133 (quoting Tertullian’s *Apology*).

number of times a Christian could repent and gain readmission to the communion of the church.”<sup>54</sup> Significantly, repentant Christians had to make a public confession of their sin before the church in order to be re-admitted, a condition which served as a significant deterrent to both sin and, for the sinner, admitting their sin in the first place.<sup>55</sup> Faithful believers were to shun the unrepentant, and “anyone who associated with an excommunicant [would] be similarly disciplined.”<sup>56</sup>

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, was famously involved in a division in the church on the question of how to treat the “lapsed,” i.e., those who sacrificed to the Roman gods in the face of persecution from the Emperor Decian in the middle of the third century. Calvin commented on Cyprian’s approach in his assessment of the discipline practices of the “ancient and better” church:

When anyone was guilty of some flagrant iniquity, and thereby caused scandal, he was first ordered to abstain from participation in the sacred Supper, and thereafter to humble himself before God, and testify his penitence before the church. There were, moreover, solemn rites, which, as indications of repentance, were wont to be prescribed to those who had lapsed. When the penitent had thus made satisfaction to the church, he was received into favor by the laying on of hands. This admission often receives the name of peace from Cyprian. . . . “They act as penitents,” [Cyprian said], “for a certain time, next they come to confession, and receive the right of communion by the laying on of hands of bishop and clergy.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>55</sup> This condition was famously imposed by Ambrose, bishop of Milan, on the Roman Emperor Theodosius in response to an order Theodosius issued authorizing the slaughter of citizens in Thessalonica. Theodosius “for some weeks . . . attended the church in the place assigned for penitents and could not receive communion.” Ibid., 135.

<sup>56</sup> Elisabeth Vodola, *Excommunication in the Middle Ages* (Los Angeles: University Of California Press, 1986), 8.

<sup>57</sup> Calvin, 4.12.6; pp. 815-816.

Oden observes that Cyprian “painstakingly and compassionately brought [the lapsed] back to a strong community of confession” and only allowed them to return to full communion after “evidencing a meaningful repentance with acts of reparation.”<sup>58</sup>

As the church grew in size and influence, its governing structures and discipline practices became more standardized and burdensome. According to Wills, there was a “basic consensus” in the churches regarding the practice of “penitential discipline” by the early fourth century, a process he describes as follows:

Penitents progressed toward restoration through a process of three or four stages. In a four-stage process penitents were first required to come to church, but they were not permitted to enter the place of worship. These “weepers” had to stand outside where they begged the prayers of the faithful as they passed. After serving the prescribed period outside, penitents were allowed inside as “hearers” and stood in a vestibule area separated from the church members. After the prescribed period, penitents were assigned a period of service among the worshippers as “kneelers.” Finally as “standers” penitents could remain during the administration of the Lord’s Supper, though without partaking. At the conclusion of all four stages, the bishop or presbyter would restore the penitents to communion.<sup>59</sup>

It must not be lost that the offender *was excommunicated first* and then, after completing the penitential process, was absolved and restored to the church.<sup>60</sup> The penitential period varied based upon the offense, with murder requiring anywhere from 20 years to life, though the penalties were regularly reduced in response to perceived genuine

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<sup>58</sup> Oden, 2. Cyprian is not without his detractors, even among modern-day writers. Davis Huckabee clearly sides with Cyprian’s opponents, the Novatianists, describing the resulting church schism as the result of a “failure to exercise church discipline” and bemoaning “intense persecution” of the Novatianists by the “laxer churches.” Davis W. Huckabee, *Studies on Church Truth* (Columbus, GA: Brentwood Christian Press, 1999). The Donatist controversy of the early fourth century likewise pitted Augustine against those who demanded a rigorous treatment of those who had denied the faith or otherwise compromised during the persecutions of Emperor Diocletian.

<sup>59</sup> Wills, “Historical Analysis,” 135-136. Those who declined the penitential process were presumably still, at this point in church history, “banished from all share in our prayer, our assembly, and all holy intercourse.” *Ibid.*, 132-134.

<sup>60</sup> Jeschke, 127, 129.

repentance.<sup>61</sup> Calvin considered these practices to be excessively severe, “altogether at variance with the injunction of our Lord, and strangely perilous” because they led to despair and not repentance.<sup>62</sup>

### The Approach in the Middle Ages

While the process for dealing with penitents changed dramatically in the Middle Ages, the church still generally practiced excommunication.<sup>63</sup> And, as Christianity increasingly became the official religion of the state, excommunication in “Christian” countries involved not only the loss of religious privileges, but “entailed also the suspension of people’s civil rights, including such things as citizenship, guild membership, legal rights, and economic rights.”<sup>64</sup> An examination of the changes to the penitential system in the Middle Ages provides some insight into how the church treated excommunicants, including increasingly ignoring offenses which would have led to excommunication in the early church.

The early church’s “system of public confession, exclusion, and penitential rigor fell into disuse” after the fourth century.<sup>65</sup> Wills reports that Nectarios, bishop of Constantinople from 381 to 398, “made participation in the Lord’s Supper a matter of

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<sup>61</sup> Jeschke describes the development of this rigorous system as well, noting that the “state of mortification” required of the penitent in the middle of the third century lasted a matter of weeks, rather than years. Jeschke, 127.

<sup>62</sup> Calvin, 4.12.8; p. 816.

<sup>63</sup> The Middle Ages, for purposes of this thesis, run from the late fourth century to the eve of the Reformation.

<sup>64</sup> Jeschke, 80 (citing Vodola, 70-111).

<sup>65</sup> Wills, “Historical Analysis,” 140.

individual conscience,” a position other Eastern bishops adopted.<sup>66</sup> In place of the penitential system “emerged a system of private confession and individual penance, . . . which developed from the practices of Celtic monks and presbyters.”<sup>67</sup> The Celtic penitential process and the older “Latin model” were both practiced in the Middle Ages, though the former largely came to supplant the latter.

Jeschke provides this description of the Celtic penitential process:

The Celtic penitential was a periodic private confession within the monastic community. Later, in the parish system, confessors spoke to a parish priest. Neither the confession nor the penance imposed (fasting, prayers, alms) was necessarily public. Nor did it require a special appearance at public worship. Furthermore, the absolution was not a matter of public liturgy, for the priest absolved in private. . . . The Latin penance was one people avoided, since it signified the humiliation of a fall and of excommunication. The Celtic was one people sought, since it signified the virtue of piety and forestalled excommunication.<sup>68</sup>

Jeschke suggests that the Celtic and Latin models grew over time into “the great and small ban, major and minor excommunication.”<sup>69</sup> The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 adopted a requirement that members of the church who failed to perform confession and penance annually would be excommunicated and “deprived of Christian burial in death.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 140-141.

<sup>68</sup> Jeschke, 129.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 131. Minor excommunication was basically a prohibition on receiving communion “identical with the state of the penitent of olden times who, prior to his reconciliation, was admitted to public penance,” Auguste Boudinhon, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909), 5: 680. Major excommunication is simply excommunication, as defined herein. The Catholic Church has recognized only major excommunication at least since the late 1800's; Ibid., 5:680ff.

<sup>70</sup> Wills, “Historical Analysis,” 141 (citing Canon 21, Decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council).

Wills' description of how the penitential system was practiced provides insight into the abuses and potential for abuse in such a system. According to Wills:

Although some offenses required a penance of years, for most offenses the period of penance was from one month to one year. The work required of penitents was generally a prescribed fast, such as a diet of bread and water only, for the period of the penance, rather than public humiliation and separation involved in progressing through the penitential stations in the church. Sometimes the prescribed work was a period of exile or the payment of a fine. For murder it might include forfeiture of one's person in the form of permanent servitude of the family of the deceased. In many instances the penitential manuals permitted substitutions for the prescribed works. A month's fasting, for example, might be fulfilled by fasting only three days in the month or by making a specified payment to the church.<sup>71</sup>

The acts of penance were set by the priest in a private confessional setting where satisfactory performance was the only means to avoid permanent excommunication. It is not surprising then that treatment of those under discipline and even excommunication decisions varied widely. The system eventually devolved into a confusing tangle of acts of penance which varied from priest to priest and, eventually, to the use of indulgences with minimal, if any, focus on repentance.<sup>72</sup> This medieval system of penance and its wide-spread abuses set the stage for the Protestant Reformation.

### The Views and Practices of Excommunication by the Reformers

While the Reformers earnestly desired to restore biblical discipline to the church, "the civil authorities were reluctant to permit the churches to exercise church discipline

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 141-142.

<sup>72</sup> Jeschke concludes that those who would excommunicate without possibility of restoration and those who would restore without regard to spiritual condition had both "moved away from repentance and faith as the basis of discipline." Jeschke, 101

apart from civil control.”<sup>73</sup> This is perhaps why Martin Luther, who boldly challenged church and civil authorities in so many matters, never thoroughly explained his own views on discipline. Jeschke notes that Luther rejected the Catholic practice of major excommunication with its attendant civil penalties, but “on several occasions . . . advocated that an individual banned from the Lord’s Supper who did not respond to the ban be given over to the secular authorities and exiled.”<sup>74</sup> The state, in the absence of a significant reform effort in this area by Luther or any of his followers, continued to administer discipline instead of the church, a practice that continued in Lutheran territories well after Luther’s death. Jeschke observes that “the eventual pattern [under Melancthon and later Lutheran leaders] was that a minister could exclude people from communion. Beyond that the consistory reserved the right to excommunicate, impose fines, or otherwise punish offenders.”<sup>75</sup>

This issue was also critical to John Calvin, who was expelled from Geneva by its city council over Calvin’s insistence that the church, rather than the civil authorities, exercise discipline. As explained by Wills, “When the council reversed course in 1538 and invited Calvin to return, Calvin accepted only on the condition that the council support the establishment of scriptural church order, including recognizing the church’s authority to administer discipline.”<sup>76</sup> Despite this apparent “victory,” Calvin agreed to a power-sharing arrangement under which discipline was exercised by a consistory

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<sup>73</sup> Wills, "Historical Analysis," 142. The church discipline practices of the Catholic and Orthodox churches from the time of the Reformation forward are outside the scope of this thesis.

<sup>74</sup> Jeschke, 132.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-133.

<sup>76</sup> Wills, "Historical Analysis," 142-143.

composed of Geneva's ministers and twelve laymen appointed by the city magistrates.<sup>77</sup> In contrast, Reformers Martin Bucer and Ulrich Zwingli made "intentional use of the secular authorities, . . . [with] the Christian magistrates functioning as elders within the church in the execution of discipline."<sup>78</sup> In England, Parliament adopted doctrinal and worship reforms proposed by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in 1549, but rejected his proposed reforms in ecclesiology. As a result, the Church of England did not have freedom to exercise church discipline, an issue which would be significant for the Separatists and Puritans in just a few years.

Excluding the Anabaptists, both the Catholic church and the churches led by the Reformers relied entirely or at least significantly upon the state in the exercise of church discipline. Church members faced not only the loss of religious privileges, including communion, but also fines, loss of property, imprisonment, exile, and even death.<sup>79</sup>

While Luther, Calvin and others wrestled with the church's authority vis-à-vis the state's authority, the Anabaptists' view of the strict separation between state and church allowed them to sidestep the issue entirely. Because they considered the church to be completely separated from the state, the Anabaptists neither sought nor countenanced any role for the state in church discipline. Their treatment of excommunicants was nevertheless quite harsh.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>78</sup> Jeschke, 133.

<sup>79</sup> Anabaptists were executed as traitors for the act of "re-baptizing" believers; Geneva's council famously had Michael Servetus burned at the stake on charges of heresy.

<sup>80</sup> The Anabaptists considered church discipline "meaningless for people who have been baptized [as infants] without their knowledge and who have not consciously affirmed the church's self-definition on the basis of which they are expelled." Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 456-457. This obviously contrasts with the

As Wills observes, Anabaptist churches “required strict conformity to righteous behavior in order to remain in fellowship. Those who did not repent of transgressions were excommunicated from the church and placed under a social ‘ban,’ excluding them from social interaction with members of the church.”<sup>81</sup> Anabaptists practiced “shunning” of excommunicants, with “hard banners,” under the leadership of Menno Simons, advocating strict or complete avoidance—even requiring that a church member completely avoid an excommunicated spouse.<sup>82</sup> In comparison, Calvin was a moderate, stating:

Though ecclesiastical discipline does not allow us to be on familiar and intimate terms with excommunicated persons, still we ought to strive by all possible means to bring them to a better mind, and recover them to the fellowship and unity of the church: as the apostle also says, ‘Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother’ (2 Thess 3:15). If this humanity be not observed in private as well as public, the danger is, that our discipline shall degenerate into destruction.<sup>83</sup>

Calvin clearly preferred a gracious, persistent engagement with the objective of winning the excommunicated member back to the church.

### The Approach of the Puritans and Separatists

Joe Coker provides a succinct background of the movement which became known as the Puritans:

For the most part Puritans were Cambridge-educated men who admired Calvin’s “neo-apostolic” church in Geneva. Believing that the Church of England after 1559 was still too popish, Puritans wanted to simplify the church’s worship and

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discipline of the Catholic church and the other Reformation churches, which exercised discipline on those baptized as infants.

<sup>81</sup> Wills, "Historical Analysis," 142.

<sup>82</sup> Jeschke, 135.

<sup>83</sup> Calvin, 4.12.10; pp. 817-818.

attacked the use of vestments, organs, the sign of the cross, and other high-church accoutrements. At the same time, however, they feared sectarianism and wished to remain within the Church of England, reforming her practices from within.<sup>84</sup>

English Puritan John Owen's perspective was representative of those who would reserve excommunication to the church. Writing in 1689, he said, "the privileges from which men are excluded by excommunication are not such as they have any natural or civil right unto . . . , but merely such as are granted unto the church by Jesus Christ."<sup>85</sup> Owen's view of how to treat an excommunicant was "the rejection of an offending brother out of the society of the church, leaving him as unto all privileges of the church in the state of a heathen, declaring him liable unto the displeasure of Christ and everlasting punishment, without repentance." He also believed, "segregation from all participation in church order, worship, and privileges is the only excommunication spoken of in Scripture."<sup>86</sup>

Owen's views notwithstanding, the English Puritans did not have any real authority in exercising discipline. In contrast, the Puritans who migrated to the American colonies had a free hand in adopting and implementing biblical church discipline. Monica Fitzgerald describes their discipline as follows:

Censure represented the only judgment or punishment Puritans [in the American colonies] could instigate against one another within the church; they could not fine, jail or execute a sinner. An accused sinner could be found innocent, forgiven, admonished, suspended from the Lord's Supper, or excommunicated. An admonishment, suspension, or excommunication would hang over the sinner until

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<sup>84</sup> Joe L. Coker, "'Cast Out From Among the Saints': Church Discipline Among Anabaptists and English Separatists In Holland, 1590-1620," *Reformation* 11, (2006, January 01): 3.

<sup>85</sup> John Owen, *Church Discipline* (Pensacola, FL: Chapel Library, 2010), 11 (originally published in *The True Nature of a Gospel Church and Its Government, the Second Part* (1689)).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

the congregation determined that the sinner had adequately confessed [in front of the whole congregation] and repented.<sup>87</sup>

Madeline Duntley, in her analysis and criticism of the Salem witch trials of 1692, states that: “Puritan excommunication was not even ‘shunning’ in the strict sense (as in the Old Order Amish practice of full social avoidance and banishment from worship). Puritan excommunicants were expected to attend worship because hearing the Word read and preached was an important phase in the process of bringing the errant one to repentance.”<sup>88</sup>

Jonathan Edwards, the New England pastor and theologian sometimes referred to as the “last Puritan,” wrote extensively on discipline and treatment of the excommunicant. He said Christians should withdraw from them, explaining: “Not that they should avoid speaking to them on any occasion—all manner and all degrees of society are not forbidden; but all unnecessary society, or such as is wont to be among those who delight in the company of each other. We should not associate with them to make them our companions.”<sup>89</sup> However, Edwards enjoined the church to pray for them, admonish them, and to perform “the common duties and offices of humanity . . . towards them: relieving them when they are sick or under any other distress; allowing them those benefits of human society and that help, which are needful for the support and defense of their lives and property.”<sup>90</sup> In contrast to the “hard banners” among the Anabaptists and

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<sup>87</sup> Monica D. Fitzgerald, "Drunkards, Fornicators, and a Great Hen Squabble: Censure Practices and the Gendering of Puritanism," *Church History* 80, no. 1 (March 2011): 46-47.

<sup>88</sup> Madeline Duntley, "Clergy, Discipline, and the Salem Witch-Hunt: Popular Stereotypes vs. 17th Century Ecclesiology," *Journal of Religion & Abuse* 7 (2005), 61.

<sup>89</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "The Nature and End of Excommunication," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 2:119.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

some Separatists, discussed below, Edwards did not believe excommunication released the duties of children to parents, parents to children, or spouses to one another.

“Separatists” were Puritans who, desiring even greater change in the church, separated from the state church to join illegal congregations. For making that choice, Separatists faced not only the ecclesiastical discipline of removal from communion, but also punishments handed down by the government, including exile or even death. Significantly for this thesis, the issue of church discipline became enormously significant for the Separatists, and they consistently considered discipline a matter exclusively for the church. According to Coker:

Church discipline had a double implication for English Separatists. First, it necessitated that they remove themselves from the impure Church of England. Hoping to reform and impure church from within was no longer an option. Thus church discipline was a central factor motivating the Separatists to separate. Secondly, discipline meant that impure members could not be tolerated within the congregation—necessitating the practices of admonition, excommunication and shunning.<sup>91</sup>

Many Separatists fled to Holland, where they encountered spiritual descendants of Menno Simon, the Waterlanders, who “maintained the traditional biblical procedure of admonition prior to excommunication . . . [and] believed that a spouse need not shun his or her excommunicated husband or wife.”<sup>92</sup> Coker conducted an exhaustive study of discipline practices and teachings of “the three main groups of English Separatists that resided in Holland during the final years of the sixteenth century and the early decades of the seventeenth century.”<sup>93</sup> He concluded:

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<sup>91</sup> Coker, 4.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 23.

For the most part, Separatists views and practices regarding church discipline were . . . compatible with that of their Mennonite neighbors in Holland [, the Waterlanders]. For example, all three Separatist groups held that discipline was an essential mark of the true church, that excommunicated members should be shunned, and, also harmonious with the Waterlanders, that shunning should not be taken to the extreme of forcing church members to avoid their own family members.<sup>94</sup>

Most of the members of the Separatist group Coker calls the “proto-Pilgrims” departed from Holland in 1620 on the *Mayflower*, carrying their views and practices of discipline into the New World.<sup>95</sup>

### Modern Views and Practices

Wills summarizes the practice (and decline) of discipline from the days of Jonathan Edwards to today as follows:

From the middle of the eighteenth century the churches that retained commitment to an active church discipline consisted largely of the evangelical denominations that supported the Great Awakening of the 1740s: New Light and Separate Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists. The Baptists kept up the most active discipline among them, and they maintained it the longest, until the early twentieth century. None of the evangelical denominations repudiated discipline in principle, but in practice it became increasingly rare by the early twentieth century.<sup>96</sup>

In a separate article, Wills meticulously analyzes the discipline practices of nineteenth-century Southern Baptists, who “brought to trial between 3 and 4 percent of their membership every year” and excommunicated about half of them.<sup>97</sup> Their treatment of

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 23-24. The fact of these distinguishing marks seems to indicate that some of Menno’s followers continued in the practices of the “hard banners.”

<sup>95</sup> Coker, 6.

<sup>96</sup> Wills, "Historical Analysis," 144.

<sup>97</sup> Gregory A. Wills, "Southern Baptists and Church Discipline," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 5.

excommunicants is instructive, if for no other reason than it reflects the last substantial effort in American Protestantism to exercise discipline faithfully.

According to Wills, 19<sup>th</sup> century Baptist churches in the southern states handled discipline at their monthly church conferences, typically on a Saturday in advance of the one worship service held per month. In response to an accusation, the church formed a discipline committee to investigate, report, and make a recommendation. Those who were found “guilty of less serious offenses and who repented of them received ‘rebuke’ or ‘censure’ from the moderator of the conference.”<sup>98</sup> As to the others, Wills records:

Those who did not repent received excommunications. So did those who committed serious offenses—whether they repented or not. Excommunication was exclusion from the fellowship of the church. It withdrew the privileges of membership. Excluded persons could not participate in the Lord’s Supper, could not vote in conference, and no longer bore the title ‘brother’ or ‘sister.’ It did not mean they were not truly redeemed. It meant rather that the person’s belief or behavior was incompatible with church membership.<sup>99</sup>

Baptist Pastor Warham Walker, writing in 1844, describes interaction with excommunicants in the following:

We may, it is true, continue our ordinary and necessary intercourse with them as men, in the concerns of life: but there must be no familiarity, no social interchange, no visitings to them, nor receiving visits from them, nothing in short that is expressive of connivance at their conduct. . . . the excommunicated person is by no means to be abandoned, as irreclaimable. Instead of being harshly repelled, as an enemy, he should still be admonished from time to time, as a fallen brother, whose recover would be hailed as an occasion of joy.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Warham Walker, *Harmony in the Church: Church Discipline* (Rochester, NY: Backus Book Publishers, 1981; reprint, Boston: Gould, Kendall and Lincoln, 1844), 123.

Baptists in this time period had a penitential practice not very different from that of the early church; penitents had to attend worship services regularly for a prescribed period of time, confess their sin before the church, and promise to live a moral lifestyle.<sup>101</sup>

As Wills acknowledges, Southern Baptists, though they diligently exercised church discipline within the institutional memory of many churches, now “manifest little zeal to obey the scripture [regarding discipline].”<sup>102</sup> Ulrich Luz likewise says, “It is well known that church discipline has gradually disappeared in the *modern age*, especially in the churches of the Reformation.”<sup>103</sup> While there are bright spots, including denominations committed to discipline like the Presbyterian Church in America and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the concept of church discipline across North America is largely unknown or ignored. Given the proliferation of denominations and non-denominational churches subsequent to the Reformation, there is no simple answer to the question “How does the modern church in North America treat excommunicants?” Only the few churches which still discipline face this issue, and their approach is often confused and inconsistent. The answer to this question, for the vast majority of churches in North America and post-Christian Europe (and churches elsewhere significantly influenced by them), is simply, “We do not excommunicate anyone.”

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<sup>101</sup> Wills, “Southern Baptists,” 7.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>103</sup> Luz, 457.

## CHAPTER 3

### MATTHEW 18:17B IN HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

The above survey of the treatment of excommunicants from Old Testament to modern times provides some background for the consideration of Matthew 18:17b. This chapter will examine the historical context of Matthew 18, and then proceed to a discussion of the literary context of Matthew 18:17b.<sup>1</sup>

#### The Immediate Historical Context of Matthew 18

The background specific to the Gospel of Matthew and its predominant themes are discussed below. Without anticipating that discussion unduly, it is possible to obtain a sense of the culture in which Jesus ministered and taught. Beginning with the Roman invasion in 63 B.C., the Jews were under Roman rule, embodied in the persons of Antipater, Antipater's son Herod the Great, Herod's three sons, and, eventually, a series of procurators.<sup>2</sup> However, as Kee observes, the basic instrument of administration for the

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Pratt persuasively argues that thematic, historical and literary analyses are indispensable to understanding a biblical text, and that "each form of analysis relies on the others." Richard L. Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1990), 103-104. This thesis does not undertake a substantial thematic analysis of Matthew in general or Matthew 18 in particular, other than to observe that a primary focus of the Matthew 18 discourse is "the essence of living in the new community." Luke C. Lee, "Church Discipline as Taught by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20," (M.A. Thesis, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1991), 5 Theological Research Exchange Network (002-0544).

<sup>2</sup> Howard Clark Kee, *The Beginnings of Christianity: An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2005), 21-22.

Romans “was the city, the local governments of which carried the major responsibilities for controlling the life of both the city itself and its region.”<sup>3</sup> Provincial governors appointed by the Romans could and did intervene and overrule the local governments, but otherwise “the legal relationships within the communities were basically as they had been before [Roman rule].”<sup>4</sup> In Jewish cities, “the key institution was the council (*boule*)—also known as the *synedrion*—whose members were respected local leading citizens, often designated as elders (*presbuteroi*).”<sup>5</sup>

The two key features of Jewish society in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, at least prior to the destruction of Herod’s temple in 70 A.D., were the temple in Jerusalem and the synagogue. While the synagogue was the center of religious study and community life in cities throughout Palestine, the temple was the focal point of religious worship in Jerusalem and for the Jewish people as a whole. The temple was also the seat of power for the Pharisees, best described as religiously zealous Jews, and the Sadducees, “the party of the Jerusalem aristocracy and the high priesthood.”<sup>6</sup> Broadly speaking then, there were three centers of power and influence in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine: the Sadducees and Pharisees based in Jerusalem, who competed for influence among the Jews; the Roman rulers; and local city government, chiefly the Sanhedrin and the elders. The tensions which would inevitably arise from such a situation are evident.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Charles F. Pfeiffer, *Between the Testaments* (Bowling Green, KY: Guardian Of Truth Foundation, 1959), 115.

The text itself provides something of the immediate historical context of Matthew 18. While the narratives in the gospels are not always presented strictly chronologically, there are indications in Matthew as to when in His ministry Jesus gave the discourse recorded in Matthew 18. It was after the Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-13) and before Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1-10), which places it within the last year of Jesus' ministry and perhaps within a few months of His crucifixion.<sup>7</sup> As to location, Matthew 17 ends with the story of Jesus paying the half-shekel tax with a coin taken from the mouth of a fish, an event which occurred in Capernaum. Matthew 18 opens with the disciples' dispute about which of them was the greatest, an event Mark 9:33 specifically places in Capernaum. Matthew 19:1 states "when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan," confirming that the Matthew 18 discourse was given in Galilee and very likely in Capernaum (Matt. 17:24).

#### The Audience Jesus Addressed in Matthew 18

Matthew 18:1 begins, "At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'"—apparently on the heels of Jesus' payment of the half-shekel tax. In response, Jesus launches into the fourth of the five discourses recorded in Matthew, often described as the "Church Discourse."<sup>8</sup> His primary audience was the twelve disciples, though it likely included others regular followers (e.g., Luke 8:1-3; 10:1) and perhaps also the "large crowds" that trailed after Him at this stage of His

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<sup>7</sup> Luke also places the events of Matthew 18:1-6 just after the Transfiguration (Luke 9:46-48).

<sup>8</sup> E.g., Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 40.

public ministry (Matt. 19:2).<sup>9</sup> There is no indication from the text of Matthew 18, in contrast to passages like Matthew 22:23-46, that the Pharisees or Sadducees were in the audience.

The background of the disciples has been extensively discussed and, except for those intent on casting doubt upon the historicity of the Gospel accounts, is not disputed. They were, in short, “a band of poor illiterate Galilean provincials, utterly devoid of social consequence, not likely to be chosen by one having supreme regard to prudential considerations.”<sup>10</sup> If Jesus’ audience extended beyond the disciples, then it very likely contained individuals much like the disciples, i.e., Jews from Galilee who were not highly educated and who made their living from the land, on the Sea of Galilee or in a trade like carpentry. They looked back with longing to the time when their nation was self-governed, and looked toward a Messiah who would throw off Roman rule and lead the nation to peace and prosperity. Jesus described the people as “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36). Though not well educated, Jesus’ audience in Matthew 18 was, first and foremost, a group of first-century Jews. Any analysis of the context of Matthew 18:17b must begin with that fact.

#### The Treatment of Gentiles and Tax Collectors by First-Century Jews

Commenting on Matthew 18:17b, Art Azurdia states simply: “A Gentile was recognized as one external to the covenant community, and a tax-gatherer was regarded

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<sup>9</sup> The audience also included, at least initially, the child Jesus displayed to illustrate the principle of humility (Matt. 18:2).

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Balmain Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1995), 37. Significantly, one disciple, the author of the Gospel of Matthew, had been a tax collector.

as an agent of the pagan government. Both were excluded from the religious life of the Jewish community.”<sup>11</sup> While Azurdia accurately portrays the Jewish attitude toward Gentiles and tax collectors, he fails to recognize that they were not only excluded from the religious life of the Jewish community, but also from virtually all positive social interaction. Laney’s treatment of this issue is more thorough:

According to the popular religious opinion of Jesus’ day, Gentiles were considered as outsiders with regard to the divine blessings promised Israel. A Gentile was not permitted to pass beyond the outer court of the temple into the sanctuary. The penalty for doing so, and thus violating the sanctity of the temple, was death. Tax-gatherers, such as Zacchaeus (Luke 19:2-10), were Jews who collected revenue for the Roman government. They were regarded as traitors because they served Rome at the expense of their countrymen. Often they overcharged people and pocketed the surplus. They represented foreign domination and corruption. Their unenviable, but lucrative, job made them the outcasts of Jewish society (cf. Matt. 9:10; 11:9; 21:31).<sup>12</sup>

Davies and Allison similarly state, “to treat someone as a Gentile and toll-collector would involve the breaking off of fellowship and hence mean exclusion from the community . . . [with] dire social and probably economic consequences.”<sup>13</sup> Lee more bluntly states that tax collectors were “numbered with harlots, thieves and murderers.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Art Azurdia, "Recovering the Third Mark of the Church," *Reformation & Revival* 3, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 67.

<sup>12</sup> J. Carl Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1985), 56.

<sup>13</sup> W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *International Critical Commentary*, ed. J.A. Emerton, C. E. B. Cranfield, and G. N. Stanton, vol. II, *Matthew 8-18*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 785. That is not to say a tax collector could not repent and, presumably, be accepted back as a member of his community. Zacchaeus’ serves as an example of one tax collector who repented (Luke 19:2), though his affiliation with Jesus probably precluded his restoration to the synagogue in Jericho.

<sup>14</sup> Lee, 32-33.

The Relationship of Matthew 18:17b to  
*Aposynagōgos* and 1 Corinthians 5

The connection between *aposynagōgos* and the language of Matthew 18:17b is not a difficult one to make. Among those expelled from the synagogue were tax collectors, who were considered to be traitors and outcasts. Gentiles were considered outside of the covenant community, and even Gentile converts were not permitted to enter into the sanctuary of the temple. Perhaps a few of the disciples would have connected the dots between Jesus' command in verse 17b and the nascent church. However, the vast majority in the audience, hearing Jesus say "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector," would have made the connection immediately to the idea of being put out of the community of Jewish believers, i.e., the synagogue. As Horbury says, "the procedure of Christian excommunication is assumed [in Matthew 18:17b] without discussion; and it is likely, therefore, that existing synagogue custom is presupposed."<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, though later in history, Paul's instructions to the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 5 were certainly connected to Jesus' command in Matthew 18:17b. By that point in time, the followers of Jesus would have understood *ekklesia* in Matthew 18 to refer to the church and not to the synagogue.<sup>16</sup> However, that fact only reinforces the connection to Matthew 18:17; Paul's admonitions to keep away from the brother, purge him from among you, and not associate or even eat with him are entirely consistent with

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<sup>15</sup>William Horbury, "Extirpation and Excommunication," *Vetus Testamentum* XXXV, no. 1 (1985): 24.

<sup>16</sup>John Hammett provides an excellent analysis of the use of *ekklesia* in the Septuagint. John S. Hammett, "Church Membership, Church Discipline, and The Nature of the Church," in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2012), 11-12.

the Jews' treatment of Gentiles and of those put out of the synagogue, including tax collectors.

### Jesus' Interactions with Gentiles and Tax Collectors

Jesus' interaction with Gentiles and tax collectors supplies another critical piece of the historical context for His teachings in Matthew 18. One of the chief complaints the Pharisees had against Jesus was that He ate "with tax collectors and sinners" (Matt. 9:10-13), a charge Jesus could not and did not deny. Jesus' opponents even called him "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Matt. 11:19). While Jesus was not a glutton or a drunkard, the Gospels provide ample evidence to demonstrate that Jesus did eat with tax collectors and sinners. One prominent example is Jesus' meal with Matthew, also called Levi: "And as Jesus reclined at table in [Matthew's] house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples" (Matt. 9:10; Mark 2:15). Not only did Jesus eat with sinners and tax collectors, He violated many other Jewish prohibitions and societal taboos, such as touching a leper (Matt. 8:3), healing a Gentile's son (8:5-13), touching a corpse (9:25), expelling a demon from a Gentile's daughter (15:22-28), and conversing alone with an immoral Samaritan woman (John 4:1-30).

When challenged about associating with sinners and tax collectors, Jesus unapologetically replied, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17).<sup>17</sup> Similarly, in response to Zacchaeus' repentance, Jesus said, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to

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<sup>17</sup> The irony, of course, is that the Pharisees were unable to see that they also were sinners.

save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Jesus associated with the outcast, the poor, the weak, the oppressed and the sinners, not to affirm their sin, but to declare the “good news of kingdom of God” (Luke 4:43). The reaction of the Samaritan woman and people from her town to Jesus reveals the intended effect of His engagement with sinners and tax collectors: “many Samaritans from that town believed in [Jesus] because of the woman’s testimony” (John 4:39). Likewise, when Zacchaeus the tax collector gave half of his goods to the poor and repaid four-fold all that he had taken by fraud, Jesus announced that “salvation has come to this house, since [Zacchaeus] also is a son of Abraham” (Luke 19:9).

Jesus’ attitude toward and association with Gentiles was perhaps even more offensive to the Jews. He did little to placate the Jewish leaders, at one point infuriating the congregation at the Nazareth synagogue by asking them why Elijah chose to heal a Gentile leper and to minister to a Gentile widow when there many lepers and widows in Israel (Luke 4:25-26). While Jesus placed the highest priority on ministry to the Jews (e.g., Matt. 10:5), it was apparent in His ministry and teachings that the Kingdom He proclaimed was not restricted to Jews. This is most evident in the “Great Commission”—Jesus’ charge to the disciples after His resurrection that they “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19). Jesus interaction with Gentiles and tax collectors was, quite simply, intended to bring them to repentance. His treatment of Gentiles and tax collectors obviously conflicted with the apparent meaning of Matthew 18:17b, or at least the meaning most likely

assumed by His audience. That contradiction, whether real or perceived, will be explored further below.

### The Literary Context of Matthew 18:17b

The first question in literary analysis is that of genre, meaning the type of literature being studied. As Carson and Moo note, “the question is an important one because accurate interpretation depends to some extent on accurate decisions about genre.”<sup>18</sup> Matthew is one of the four New Testament books known as a *gospel*, itself a word derived from an Old English word meaning “good news.” Upon examining the gospels, it quickly becomes clear that “there are no adequate parallels to the genre of the gospels,”<sup>19</sup> which “combine teaching and action in a preaching-oriented work that stands apart from anything else in the ancient world.”<sup>20</sup> However, while the gospels as a whole have no adequate genre parallels, component parts of the gospels do present recognizable genres. In other words, it is possible to determine with some degree of certainty what type of literary material is presented within a particular text in the gospels, such as a parable or historical narrative, and analyze that text accordingly.

Jesus’ parables are of particular interest to this thesis, as they compose the bulk of the text in Matthew 18 and sandwich the passage under consideration here. It is important to note that the parables not only convey particular truths, but were placed into the gospels in a way that reinforces the author’s intended themes and emphases. As

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<sup>18</sup> D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 113.

<sup>19</sup> Guthrie, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Carson & Moo, 115.

Walter Kaiser and Moisés Silva state, “careful study of the parables involves not only seeing them in the historical context of Jesus’ ministry but also understanding how they function in the narrative of each gospel.”<sup>21</sup> The primary focus of the literary analysis herein will be to examine how the material surrounding Matthew 18:15-20 informs the instructions Jesus gave in those verses.

### The Gospel of Matthew

Though not persuaded of Matthean authorship, Daniel Harrington provides helpful insight into the themes and purposes of the author of Matthew, to whom he refers as “the evangelist.” Harrington states:

The evangelist (and his community) seems to have been Jewish in background and in interests. He shows a special interest in the Hebrew Scriptures as a witness to the person and activity of Jesus, most dramatically in the so-called fulfillment quotations (1:22-23; 2:15, 17-18, 23, etc.). . . . The evangelist stands in opposition to the Jews who have control of “their synagogues” (4:23; 9:35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:54), which are synagogues of the hypocrites (6:2, 5; 23:6, 34) according to Matthew. He is particularly concerned with determining the proper relationship between Jesus the Messiah and the Torah (see 5:17-20) and with opposing the authority of the “scribes and Pharisees” as the interpreters of the Torah.<sup>22</sup>

Harrington emphasizes the author’s familiarity with Jewish traditions and practices, and sets forth the principle themes of Matthew as kingdom of heaven, righteousness and perfection.<sup>23</sup> Lee suggests the principles themes are the person of Christ and His royal character, the importance of the Law, and “the essence of living in the new Messianic

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<sup>21</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., and Moisés Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 166.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, *Sacra Pagina*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 1, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

community,” a theme which incorporates Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 18.<sup>24</sup> The theme of living in the new Messianic community and the focus on opposing the authority of the scribes and Pharisees are particularly important for this thesis.

As Lenski points out, “Matthew writes from the Jewish standpoint for Jewish readers. Jewish terms and Jewish matters, therefore receive little or no elucidation—his [hearers] were expected to understand.”<sup>25</sup> For example, Jesus’ instructions in Matthew 18:15-17 regarding the resolution of disputes “reflect the rules and customs that were commonplace in the several first-century Judaisms, including those of the Pharisees and the Essenes.”<sup>26</sup> As another example, Jesus uses the word “church” (*ekklesia*) in Matthew 18:17 in a manner that indicates He expected the hearers to understand His meaning. As Lee observes:

Matthew is replete with Old Testament quotations, discussion of laws, Jewish customs and practices. When Jesus used *ekklesia* in conjunction with the discipline procedures [of Matthew 18], there is little doubt that His disciples understood Him as saying, ‘Tell it to the synagogue.’ In fact, with the Jewish upbringing and background of most of the disciples, the only way they would understand the term *ekklesia* is in a Jewish frame of mind.<sup>27</sup>

According to Guthrie, “the most obvious feature of Matthew’s structure is the alternation of large blocks of teaching material with narrative sections.”<sup>28</sup> The sections of teaching materials, referred to as “discourses,” can be described as: “The Sermon on the

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<sup>24</sup> Lee, 4-5.

<sup>25</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1964), 21.

<sup>26</sup> Bridget Illian, "Church Discipline and Forgiveness in Matthew 18:15-35," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37, no. 6 (December 2010): 446.

<sup>27</sup> Lee, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Guthrie, 29.

Mount (5-7); Missionary Discourse (10); Parable Discourse (13); Church Discourse (18); and Eschatological Discourse (24-25).”<sup>29</sup> R. C. Sproul points out that “these five divisions may have been patterned after the five books of Moses, to present Jesus as the Prophet like Moses.”<sup>30</sup> Sproul’s outline of Matthew focuses on the Kingdom: the Kingdom comes (3-7); the works of the Kingdom (8-10); the nature of the Kingdom (11-13); the authority of the Kingdom (14-18); Kingdom blessings and judgments (19-25); and passion and resurrection (26-28).<sup>31</sup> Both of these outlines provide a sense of the context of Matthew 18 within the gospel of Matthew.

### Matthew 18

Matthew 17 opens with a description of the Jesus’ transfiguration, tells of Jesus healing a demon-possessed boy, and ends with the story of Jesus paying the half-shekel tax with a coin taken from the mouth of a fish. Lee suggests these events and the preceding confession of Christ by Peter are not necessarily recorded chronologically, but are arranged to highlight the future community of believers and its leaders. In light of that, Lee concludes that Matthew 18:15-20 “must be understood in light of Jesus’ intention: the basis of treating a sinning brother within this new emerging community is love and forgiveness, with the priority of reconciling this brother back to fellowship.”<sup>32</sup> One approach to examining the literary context of Matthew 18:17b is to consider whether the text of Matthew 18 supports Lee’s thesis.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>30</sup> R. C. Sproul, *The Reformation Study Bible* (Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2005), 1360.

<sup>31</sup> Sproul, 1361.

<sup>32</sup> Lee, 10.

Guthrie outlines Matthew 18 itself as follows: “An enquiry about greatness (18:1-5). Responsibility for causing others to stumble (18:6-10). Illustration of the lost sheep (18:11-14). Reproofs and reconciliation (18:15-22). Parable of the unmerciful servant (18:23-35).”<sup>33</sup> In verses 1-5, Jesus responds to a dispute among his disciples about who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven, stating that “however humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Verses 6-10 warn of the dangers of sin and particularly the dangers of causing “one of these little ones who believe it me to sin.” This passage contains Jesus’ famous statement that it would be better to cut off a hand if it causes you to sin. In verses 11-14, Jesus describes the man who leaves the 99 sheep to search for the one that went astray and, upon finding it, rejoices more over the one found than the 99 who did not stray. Verses 15-20 set forth the process for dealing with a brother who offends, including the key instruction of 17b discussed at length herein and a passage about the authority of the church in binding and loosing. Finally, verses 21-35 contain the parable of the unforgiving servant, essentially the story of a man forgiven an enormous debt who is then unwilling to forgive his fellow servant’s much smaller debt.

Excluding the central passage of Matthew 18:15-20, there are several prominent themes in Matthew 18, including humility, the dangers of sin, restoration, reconciliation and forgiveness. Matthew, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, surrounded the instructions of verses 15-20 with passages which direct us to the heart of the process set forth there. Stated differently, the steps of Matthew 18-15-20, up to and including the

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<sup>33</sup> Guthrie, 59. Guthrie curiously includes verses 21-22 in “Reproofs and correction,” when it more naturally fits as an introduction to the parable of the unforgiving servant. Also, note that Matthew 18:11 is omitted in the ESV and some other translations because it does not appear in the earliest manuscripts. According to the NASB, that verse reads: “For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.”

excommunication of 17b, must be taken in humility, with full awareness of the dangers of sin,<sup>34</sup> and with the intention of promoting repentance,<sup>35</sup> forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration. Parackel Mathew, though unconvinced that Matthew's attribution of these statements to Jesus was accurate, nevertheless concludes that placing verses 15-20 after the parable of the lost sheep "is intended not merely to describe the juridical system of the local Church, but also to state a general principle that every member has to make every effort to bring to reconciliation a brother (that is, a lost sheep or one of the little ones, v. 14) who is at fault. The same emphasis is further brought out in 18:21f, where a disciple is told to forgive a brother not just a few times but 'seventy times seven.'"<sup>36</sup> Tara Barthel and Dave Edling likewise point out that the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the unforgiving servant "serve as bookends to support the 'book'—God's search and rescue plan found in verses 15-20."<sup>37</sup> Thus, an examination of the passages surrounding Matthew 18:15-20 bears out Lee's thesis—i.e., that "the basis of treating a sinning brother within this new emerging community is love and forgiveness, with the priority of reconciling this brother back to fellowship."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Galatians 6:1 likewise warns those seeking to restore one caught in a sin to "keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted."

<sup>35</sup> The objective of repentance, though not obviously expressed in Matthew 18, is implicit throughout the chapter. For example, the brother who "listens to you" would evidence his listening by repentance, indicated by confession and, where appropriate, restitution. The fractured relationship would, as a consequence, be reconciled.

<sup>36</sup> Parackel K. Mathew, "Authority and Discipline," *Communio Viatorum* 18, no. 3-4 (1985, January 01): 123-124.

<sup>37</sup> Tara Klena Barthel and David V. Edling, *Redeeming Church Conflicts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 203.

<sup>38</sup> Lee, 10.

## Matthew 18:17b

Matthew 18:17 states, “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” In context, this verse is the last step in the process given by Jesus for the resolution of disputes within the church. However, as discussed above, the “against you” language of verse 15 does not restrict the application of the Matthew 18 process or excommunication to personal offenses.<sup>39</sup> As Luz states, “it is a biblical, Jewish, and early Christian conviction that every sin affects the entire church.”<sup>40</sup> Whether the starting point for discipline is an offense against a brother or simply any sin,<sup>41</sup> the catalyst for involving one or two others and, ultimately, the church in the matter is the sinning brother’s “refusal to listen” (Matt. 18:16, 17), often referred to as contumacy. Indeed, it may be accurately said that, with the exception of notorious public offenses (e.g., 1 Cor. 5), the church only disciplines its members for contumacious behavior.<sup>42</sup> Thus the context for the application of verse 17b is supplied by 17a—i.e., the brother “refuses to listen even to the church.” As Ken Sande explains, the decision to treat him as a Gentile or a tax

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<sup>39</sup> Laney, 49. See also Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), 45 (noting that “against you” may be “an early interpolation into the original text”).

<sup>40</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 451.

<sup>41</sup> While it is dangerous to categorize any sin as “minor,” there are indications in Scripture that confrontation is reserved for significant sinful behavior; see, for example, Galatians 6:1 (confronting one who is “caught in their sin”); and 2 Thess. 3:11 (Paul’s admonition of busybodies). At least as to personal offenses, Proverbs 19:11 states that “it is to [a man’s] glory to overlook an offense.” Laney concludes that “the corrective action taken will vary according to the reaction of the offender, but known sin requires some response.” Laney, 47.

<sup>42</sup> A member who truly repents of his sin may be greatly in need of the formative discipline of the church, but has already demonstrated the very response corrective discipline is intended to generate.

collector is a “functional decision: If a person behaves like a nonbeliever would—by disregarding the authority of Scripture and of Christ’s church—he should be treated as if he were a nonbeliever.”<sup>43</sup>

Matthew 18:17b raises a number of interesting issues which are outside the scope of this thesis. For example, does the authority for making an excommunication decision rest with the officers or the church membership? Answers to this question appear to depend largely upon the writer’s ecclesiology.<sup>44</sup> On that issue, Davies and Allison conclude that Matthew 18:17 is intended to highlight the congregation’s role in bringing about reconciliation, not to make a statement about church government.<sup>45</sup> That conclusion is consistent with the idea that the objective of even an excommunication decision is repentance and the restoration of the excommunicant to fellowship in the church. Another significant issue relating to verse 17b is whether the church should continue the discipline process when a member resigns.<sup>46</sup> Additional questions relate to disciplining regular visitors, communicating discipline decisions to other churches, and the degree to which information about discipline decisions should be communicated to the officers, subdivisions of the congregation, or the entire congregation. Wray and

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<sup>43</sup> Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker*, 3rd ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 193.

<sup>44</sup> E.g., J. L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology: A Treatise on Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1871). Dagg states excommunication is “to be inflicted, not by the officers of the church, but by the whole church assembled together.”

<sup>45</sup> Davies & Allison, 786-787. Davies & Allison describe the case for excommunication decisions by the congregation, rather than church officers, as an argument from silence. Indeed, there is nothing explicit in I Corinthians 5 to indicate that the elders of the church at Corinth did not make the decision to expel the immoral man. The congregation’s action, when “assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus,” could well have been under the leadership and direction of the officers.

<sup>46</sup> Wray builds a strong case for continuing the discipline process to completion, but many churches terminate discipline at the point of resignation under the reasoning that the church has lost jurisdiction over the member. Daniel E. Wray, *Biblical Church Discipline* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1978), 14-15.

Laney do an excellent job of addressing these and a number of other issues in a question and answer format.<sup>47</sup>

One issue presented by Matthew 18:18-20 which does have a direct bearing on the application of verse 17b is the significance of the church's action with respect to the excommunicant's spiritual condition. Immediately following verse 17, Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." (Matt. 18:18-20). This passage raises immediate questions about the authority of the church and the effect of church discipline. For example, does an excommunication decision affect the person's salvation? If not, what is the spiritual consequence of an excommunication decision? More broadly stated, what exactly does this passage mean? This issue, like many issues raised in this thesis, deserves a thorough analysis in a separate thesis or dissertation. It is helpful, however, to provide at least a preliminary answer to these questions here.

On this point, Al Mohler observes: "The terms binding and loosing were familiar terms used by rabbis in the first century to refer to the power of judging matters on the basis of the Bible. The Jewish authorities would determine how (or whether) the Scriptures applied in a specific situation and would render judgment by either binding, which meant to restrict, or loosing, which mean to liberate."<sup>48</sup> Alfred Poirier concurs, noting that "when they bound someone, they removed and excluded him from fellowship

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<sup>47</sup> Wray, 10-18; Laney, 151-163.

<sup>48</sup> R. Albert Mohler, "Church Discipline: The Missing Mark," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 23.

within the synagogue. Conversely, when they loosed someone, they included him in synagogue membership.”<sup>49</sup> It appears clear that this passage is primarily intended to reflect “the Lord’s sanction of the church’s action.”<sup>50</sup> As Poirier says, “Immediately after describing how the church can decide to cast out a brother (or a sister), Jesus expressly states that he will stand behind the officers of his church in the exercise of their duties.”<sup>51</sup>

That an excommunication decision has a significant spiritual effect is clear from Matthew 18:18-20 and such passages as 1 Corinthians 5:5 (“deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh”), but the precise effect is not so clear.<sup>52</sup> And the fact that it does have a significant spiritual effect should profoundly affect the manner in which the church approaches discipline. That effect does not, however, include consigning an excommunicant who is a genuine Christian to eternal damnation, as such a result would contradict the promise of passages like John 10:28 (“no one will snatch them out of my hand”) and Romans 8:1 (“there is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”). As Mark Dever says, “corrective church discipline is never meant to be the final statement about a person’s final destiny.”<sup>53</sup> Calvin’s comment on this question is helpful: “For when our Savior promises that what his servants bound on earth should be bound in heaven (Matt. 18:18), he confines the power of binding, to the censure of the church,

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<sup>49</sup> Alfred Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 236.

<sup>50</sup> Luz, 448.

<sup>51</sup> Poirier, 237.

<sup>52</sup> Azurdia states that the excommunicant is removed "from the protective benefits and sanctifying influences of the Spirit-indwelt assembly [and] placed in the demonically-controlled domain of Satan." Azurdia, 67.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Dever, "Biblical Church Discipline," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4 (winter 2000): 39.

which does not consign those who are excommunicated to perpetual ruin and damnation, but assures them, when they hear their life and manners condemned, that perpetual damnation will follow if they do not repent.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, those who refuse to listen to the church should be aware that their refusal may reflect that they have an unregenerate heart; repentance and faith in Christ would be the first step in that person’s restoration to the church.

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<sup>54</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 4.12.10; p. 817.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

This thesis is focused upon the meaning and application of ‘let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector’ in Matthew 18:17b or, stated differently, it asks the question “how should the church treat those who have been excommunicated?” While the church’s treatment of excommunicants over the centuries can provide some guidance, the historical survey above shows that the church’s practices have varied from extremely harsh in some periods to largely nonexistent in others. There is nevertheless still much to learn from church history about church discipline, particularly in an age where very few churches take discipline seriously. At a minimum, the wide variation in historical discipline practices emphasizes the need to carefully evaluate each of those practices from a biblical perspective. While the historical and literary context of Matthew 18:17b does not provide a precise answer to the question posed by this thesis, that context does provide enough guidance to determine some concrete principles for application. This chapter sets forth, based upon the discussion and analysis above, conclusions regarding the original audience’s understanding of Matthew 18:17b, lessons from the historical and literary context, an evaluation of historical practices, and principles and guidelines for the practice of discipline in the church today.

### The Original Audience's Understanding of Matthew 18:17b

The audience for Jesus' "Church Discourse" in Matthew 18 definitely included the disciples and likely also a larger crowd containing additional followers of Jesus and the curious. Perhaps the disciples were beginning, at this point in Jesus' ministry, to understand *ekklesia* as a reference to the church He would establish. However, their confusion about so much of what Jesus said and did, including their despair over His crucifixion, indicates that they did not understand what He meant until after the Day of Pentecost. Almost certainly then, the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews listening to Jesus' words, including the disciples, would have understood "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" to mean "put him out of the synagogue." In practice, this would have meant the person was excluded from study of the Torah and any community gatherings at the Synagogue.<sup>1</sup> As reflected by the Pharisees' horror at Jesus eating with tax collectors, it would have been unacceptable even to eat with such a one. In short, to treat someone as a Gentile or tax collector would be to exclude them from the community of believers or, as Paul expressed it later, "not to associate with" them.

### Lessons from the Historical and Literary Context

The first critical lesson from the historical and literary context is the meaning of "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" to its original audience, discussed above. The harshness of the exclusion indicated by Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18:17b is emphasized by the historical background of discipline practices in the Old Testament and intertestamental

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<sup>1</sup> Given the fact that the synagogue was ruled by a council of elders, this was likely a decision made by the council (or sanhedrin), rather than by popular vote of the people. This lends support to the idea that excommunication decisions rest with the officers of the church, rather than the whole congregation.

period. Old Testament discipline ranged at least from capital punishment to complete exclusion from the Jewish community, with the latter practice more clearly evident in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. While there is not a great deal of information on exclusion from the covenant community in the intertestamental period, the Essenes and Qumran communities did expel members for various offenses, a practice very similar to the concept of *apoposynogōs* described in John 9. Expulsion from the synagogue was almost certainly the model for the early church's practice of excommunication.

The Pauline epistles and particularly 1 Corinthians 5 provide some historical context from just a few decades after Jesus gave the discourse recorded in Matthew 18. In those epistles, Paul instructs the church to keep away from the excommunicant, have nothing to do with him, rebuke him publicly, warn him as a brother, purge him from among you, and not associate or even eat with him. And, Paul's use of the Deuteronomic formula for separation in 1 Corinthians 5 directly ties the act of excommunication to the Old Testament precedent for separation from the religious community. Though somewhat later in time, the early church's increasingly rigorous practice of discipline reflected the gravity they attached to Jesus' and Paul's commands to exclude the one who refused to listen to the church. However, their exclusionary practices grew to be so harsh that John Calvin, an ardent admirer of the "ancient and better church," concluded they were "altogether at variance with injunction of our Lord, and strangely perilous" because they led to despair and not repentance.<sup>2</sup>

The second critical lesson from the historical context is one also supported by the literary context of Matthew 18:15-20—i.e., the goal of treating someone "as a Gentile and a

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 4.12.8; p. 816.

tax collector” is to bring about their repentance, reconciliation and restoration to the church.

As Luz observes, there is an obvious “tension between the church discipline of vv. 15-17 and the encouragement to practice unlimited forgiveness and to seek the lost (vv. 12-14, 21-22).”<sup>3</sup>

There is an even more obvious tension between the apparent meaning of Matthew 18:17b and Jesus’ own treatment of Gentiles and tax collectors. Quite simply, Jesus did not flatly exclude them; rather, he ate with tax collectors and sinners, and (at least occasionally) ministered to Gentiles, all for the purpose of declaring the “good news of kingdom of God” (Luke 4:43).<sup>4</sup> Or, as Jesus said when challenged about His actions, “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32). The “bookend” parables on either side of Matthew 18:15-20, the parables of the lost sheep and the unforgiving servant, are entirely consistent with that perspective, using the steps of Matthew 18:15-17 for the purpose of calling sinners to repentance and restoration to the covenant community.

The third critical lesson from the literary and historical context is to recognize that Jesus’ teachings create a very real tension between engagement and exclusion. Matthew 18:17b appears to demand harsh exclusion, but in Luke’s version of the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus concludes by saying “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7).

Paul’s writings emphasize a seemingly harsh exclusion, instructing the church to “purge him from among you” and warning of the dangerous leaven of malice and evil. But, even Paul’s

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<sup>3</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 461.

<sup>4</sup> Illian concludes that “there is one positive role for Gentiles to play [in Matthew]: they are foils for those of ‘little faith,’ Jesus’ Jewish followers.” Bridget Illian, “Church Discipline and Forgiveness in Matthew 18:15-35,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37, no. 6 (December 2010): 449. However, Illian does recognize that Jesus authorized “a mission to the Gentiles after his resurrection (Matt. 28:19) in the famous Great Commission.” *Ibid.*

admonitions point toward the need to engage with the excommunicant. For example, on the heels of “have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed,” Paul writes, “Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother” (2 Thess. 3:14-15). Similarly, Paul’s joy in the repentance of the one described in 2 Corinthians 2 is obvious; he instructs the Corinthians to “forgive and comfort him” and “reaffirm your love for him” (2 Cor. 2:7-8). These two seemingly contradictory principles are in fact reconcilable. As Calvin said, “though ecclesiastical discipline does not permit us to live familiarly or have intimate contact with excommunicated persons, we ought nevertheless to strive by whatever means we can in order that they may turn to a more virtuous life and may return to the society and unity of the church.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, the church must exclude the contumacious brother, but persistently and gently encourage him to repent and be restored.

#### A Critical Evaluation of Historical and Modern-Day Practices of Discipline

The belief among some in the early church that there could be no second repentance for sin was neither in accord with Scripture (e.g., 1 John 1:8) nor consistent with the universal experience of believers. But even those in the early church who did not place a limit on repentance nevertheless implemented a rigorous approach to discipline involving immediate exclusion, a lengthy penitential period and public confession of sin. The early church is to be commended for taking discipline seriously, though several aspects of their discipline process seem much more heavily weighted toward exclusion than engagement. It appears these churches excommunicated repentant sinners as a first step in the discipline process, rather than excommunicating them only if they refused to listen to the church as

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<sup>5</sup> Calvin, 4.12.10; pp. 817-818.

required in Matthew 18:17. Further, the ever-lengthening penitential periods were based upon an arbitrary system of grading the severity of sins and contributed toward a works-salvation approach to repentance. Finally, the requirement of public humiliation and public confession before the whole church, while not necessarily unbiblical, likely dissuaded a great many from voluntarily confessing their sin and others from seeking restoration at all. Calvin correctly observed that these practices were excessively severe.

Celtic penance was arguably more focused on engagement, though at the expense of any serious treatment of exclusion. It largely eliminated the requirement of a public confession and public humiliation, which likely encouraged the voluntary confession of sin. However, while Scripture does call upon believers to “confess your sins to one another and pray for one another” (James 5:16), it does not create a formal system of confession, require confession to a priest, or give the priest or anyone else the authority to grant remission of sin upon performance of penance.<sup>6</sup> Further, the required works of penance varied widely from priest to priest and, increasingly, little of the mandated penance was actually required. This led to great hypocrisy, favoritism for the wealthy and, ultimately, to the doctrine of indulgences and other abuses of the penitential system.

While the Reformers diligently sought to recover biblical church discipline, there was a disappointing failure to distinguish between the appropriate roles of the state and the church in ecclesiastical discipline. This failure was not particularly related to either exclusion or engagement, but rather to the church’s failure to insist on its own prerogatives. Even Calvin, who fought vigorously to protect the church’s authority to impose discipline, ultimately

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<sup>6</sup> To some degree, the development of Celtic penance and the resulting tug of war between the church hierarchy and the individual priests mirrored the dispute between Cyprian and the “confessors” over who should be allowed to set conditions for readmission of the “lapsed” into the church. Roland H. Bainton, *Early Christianity* (Malabar, FL: Robert E. Krieger Publishing, 1984), 44-45.

acceded to an arrangement where the church and the state shared this authority. Other Reformers, like Cranmer in England, were unsuccessful in wresting this authority from the state and, as a result, the church was powerless to act and especially “beholden unto the greatness, authority, and wealth of many, whom the ecclesiastical courts care not to conflict [therewith].”<sup>7</sup> Excommunicants were not only deprived of communion and the privileges of church membership, but were fined, jailed and even executed. In opposing this condition, John Owen said, “the privileges from which men are excluded by excommunication [should not be] such as they have any natural or civil right unto . . . , but merely such as are granted unto the church by Jesus Christ.”<sup>8</sup> As Marlin Jeschke states, there is “not even the hint [in the New Testament] of a sword, gallows, firing squad, electric chair, or lethal injection as one of the possible instruments of church discipline.”<sup>9</sup>

Another historical discipline practice which seems contrary to Scripture is the practice by some Anabaptists and Separatists of shunning or imposing a complete social ban. The most extreme approach was that of Menno Simons, who required that a married person avoid all social contact and interaction with their excommunicated spouse. This practice emphasized exclusion to the point that engagement was not only disallowed, but was itself a condition for excommunication. The intrusion of the “hard ban” even into the marital relationship is not only in opposition to Scriptural principles of marriage (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:12-17) but also demonstrates the harshness of the attitudes of its adherents. The literary and historical context of Matthew 18:17 reveals that Jesus requires Christians to engage with the

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<sup>7</sup> John Owen, *Church Discipline* (Pensacola, FL: Chapel Library, 2010), 9 (originally published in *The True Nature of a Gospel Church and Its Government, the Second Part* (1689)).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Marlin Jeschke, *Discipling in the Church: Recovering a Ministry of the Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1972), 86.

excommunicant to persuade them to repent and be restored. The “hard banners” either did not understand that obligation or chose to ignore it entirely.

In general, any treatment of excommunicants by the church over history which overly emphasized exclusion or engagement is in error. In overemphasizing exclusion, the church tends to impose conditions not required by Scripture and lead the sinner to despair rather than repentance. In overemphasizing engagement, the church tends to ignore or trivialize sin and avoid its obligations to discipline members. An appropriate balance between exclusion and engagement, while difficult to maintain in practice, is the clear mandate of Scripture.

The modern-day practice of abandoning discipline altogether is a clear violation of Scripture and Christ’s command. Calvin correctly observed that “all who either wish that discipline were abolished, or who impede the restoration of it, whether they do this of design or through thoughtlessness, certainly aim at the complete devastation of the church.”<sup>10</sup> And, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said, “Nothing can be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to his sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a brother back from the path of sin.”<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the apparent powerlessness of the church today, at least in North America and Europe, in proclamation of the gospel is entirely or in part a direct consequence of the church’s disobedience in this area.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Calvin, 4.12.1; p. 813.

<sup>11</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954), 107.

<sup>12</sup> As G. I. Williamson states, “When a church . . . fails to exercise church discipline, it must not be imagined that it will retain power to open and close the kingdom of God to men by preaching.” G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian And Reformed Publishing, 1964), 235.

### Application of Matthew 18:17b Today

The most important principle for the application of Matthew 18:17b today is that the church must recover the “third mark” of the true church, by taking up once again the crucial ministry of discipline. In doing so, it must take seriously both its obligation to exclude the contumacious brother and its obligation to persistently and winsomely engage that same brother with the objective of winning him back to the church. Richardson engagingly describes the treatment of someone as a Gentile and a tax collector in the following: “This is actually a beautiful picture from the vantage point of the New Testament. It was, after all, to Gentiles and tax collectors, to unworthy people, that the hope of the gospel was offered in Christ. So we now are to treat our fallen brother as a missionary would treat one who had not heard. We are to explain the gospel to them, reintroduce them to what it means to be a Christian, and plead with them for their return.”<sup>13</sup> Every step of Matthew 18:15-17, up to and including excommunication, must be taken with the purpose of and heart inclined toward promoting repentance, reconciliation and restoration to the covenant community. When an excommunicated member refuses to repent and return, the church must find comfort in the fact that it is being faithful and obedient to the commands of Christ. And when an excommunicated member repents, is reconciled to God and the church, and is restored to membership, the church must rejoice that the Lord has restored one of His own to the flock.

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<sup>13</sup> Wyman Lewis Richardson, *Walking Together: A Congregational Reflection on Biblical Church Discipline* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 101.

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