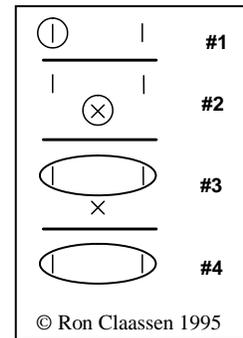


Introduction

Since the Bible is my primary guide for life, it is important to me to examine the Biblical text for the purpose of valuing and/or prioritizing each of the four options and their interrelationship.

As an Anabaptist Mennonite Christian, a basic starting point is that God’s vision is, as we have been told in the Bible, that all people would experience *shalom* relationships (peaceful relationships due to being in right relationships with each other and with God).

Since a comprehensive study of the Bible is beyond the scope of this article, I decided to focus on Matthew 18, with a primary emphasis on vv. 15-17. Menno Simons, an early Anabaptist leader and the one after whom Mennonites are named, called this passage, the “rule of Christ.” Matthew 18 was included in most early Anabaptist writing about church life as a guide for church discipline. Many churches abandoned using it due to abuses. But many churches still utilize this passage as a guide for church discipline and/or for addressing conflict between members. I will be looking at how the steps of Matthew 18: 15-17 compare to the “Four Options Model,” noting especially which options are preferred and which are reserved as back-up options.



The vision of Shalom reminds us that God’s preference is for people to live in right relationship with each other and with God. A person “sins” when doing something that damages a relationship. When v. 15 refers to a situation where a member of the church “sins against you” it means that one has acted in a way that is anti-shalom.

It is important to read the specific strategy in vv. 15-17 as a process intended to restore Shalom. When I read Matthew 18 with this idea in mind, the paragraphs before v. 15 appear to be focused on helping the one who has been “sinned against” to prepare for a constructive confrontation. The balance of the chapter, after v.17, focuses primarily on the purpose of the process as outlined in vv. 15-17, restored shalom relationships based on experiencing forgiveness and reconciliation.

I will briefly describe the “Preparation” (vv. 1-14) and the “Goal” (vv. 18-35) and then, in more depth, examine “The Process” (vv. 15-17).

Preparation: (vv. 1- 14)

The first paragraph addresses the motivation of the one “who has been sinned against” and is considering confronting the offender.

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ ²He called a child, whom he put among them, ³and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. ⁶If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better

for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.” (NRSV)

This passage says, when read through the lens of preparing for a confrontation intended to restore Shalom, that if even part of the motivation for the confrontation is for the purpose of trying to show who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven, the confronter is not ready. Asking the question “Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (v. 1) is the wrong question because it will only cause more division and not lead to re-establishing shalom. It is very important for the confronter to do some self examination and be certain that trying to prove or demonstrate “Who is greatest...” is not the real or underlying motivator for wanting to confront.

The second paragraph encourages the confronter to consider whether a confrontation might have a destructive impact on the one being confronted.

7 Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes! ⁸If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. ⁹And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire. ¹⁰Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. (NRSV)

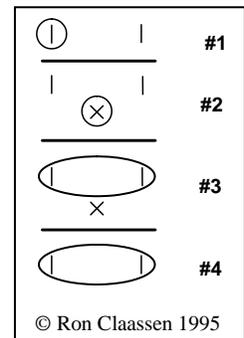
This is a stern warning to the one planning to confront. A serious consideration when planning to confront another must be whether the confrontation might become a “stumbling block” to the other.

For example, as a mediator with families and churches, I have observed some actions that become a “stumbling block.” One person, usually the one initiating the confrontation, can make a comment or roll his eyes in a certain way, and the other immediately reacts, loses self control, becomes angry, and says things that are very destructive. The one who reacts is usually the less mature one or the one with less power. Jesus always cares for the ones with less power. This warning is for the more powerful one, who, with some reflection and self examination, knows they have the ability to “set the other off.”

Before confronting someone who has “sinned against you,” it is essential to prepare by conducting a self examination and making a commitment not do those things that will “be a stumbling block” and interfere with the re-establishment of shalom.

The paragraph just before the outlined process uses a story to clarify the only legitimate goal and purpose for utilizing the confrontation process.

¹²What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost. (NRSV)

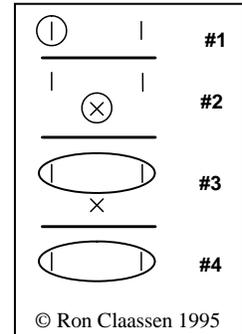


The confronter is ready to proceed when, after careful self examination, the confronter is clear that the underlying intention is restoration and re-integration. In the story, the shepherd does not focus on the ninety-nine and feel alright about losing the one. He does not just wait around to see if the other will return. He is not going out to punish the one that has gone astray. Instead, he goes out, perhaps at great risk to his own safety, to recover the one that has been lost and, if he is successful, he rejoices.

The confronter is ready if his intention is to re-establish wholeness and right relationships. This paragraph makes it clear that the process to follow is not about deciding how to put someone out, but rather to encourage re-integration.

These preparation paragraphs advise, in very strong language, that the one who is considering confronting is ready only if:

1. the motivation to prove who is greatest has been eliminated,
2. the possibility of being a stumbling block for the other has been eliminated,
3. the intention is to restore the relationship and re-integrate the other, and
4. the confronter is ready to rejoice when right relationships are restored.



The Goal (vv. 18-35)

Forgiveness is the focus of most of the chapter after v. 17. But between the process outline and the comments on forgiveness is a small section which highlights three essentials which must not be lost when focusing on the details of the process: 1) the importance of re-integration and the re-establishing of right relationships, 2) the power of agreement and 3) the assurance that if the confrontation is approached for the right purpose, the Spirit of Jesus, the reconciling Spirit, will be present (inside the circle with the parties in #3 or #4).

¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

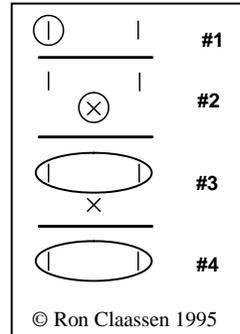
¹⁹Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’ (NRSV)

The balance of the chapter is focused on forgiveness. It starts with an encouragement to not give up. Sometimes a person is tempted to not enter the forgiveness process. Sometimes a person is resistant to confronting another and trying to re-establish right relationships. Sometimes this resistance is because they have tried confronting before and it was not successful. But the encouragement is to never give up.

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ ²²Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. (NRSV)

The phrase, seventy-seven (or seventy times seven), is only used on a few occasions. One, in Genesis 4:23, describes Lamech bragging to his family, “I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.” Jesus, who knew the Hebrew scripture well, uses this occasion to reverse what some still thought. Jesus says that God is not in favor of revenge, and especially not on one who is less powerful, rather God’s people should put all of their energy and time into doing those things that will repair a violation or injustice and restore right relationships. This process is what is described as forgiveness.

I am not going to provide a thorough discussion of the forgiveness process in this article. In an article, “A Peacemaking Model” (Claassen, 2003) I examine the role of forgiveness in peacemaking and suggest that forgiveness is discovered when people come together with a commitment to be constructive (love-*agape*), recognize the injustices (confession), and find agreements that restore equity (atonement) and clarify future commitments to prevent the injustice from happening again (repentance). I think the stories that complete this chapter illustrate this assertion in a very dramatic fashion and again emphasize how important it is, especially for the more powerful one, to take the initiative to re-establish shalom relationships.



The texts surrounding The Process demonstrate that self examination and preparation are essential before the first step and throughout the process. It is essential that the ones involved in the confrontation are clear that:

1. the motivation to prove who is greatest has been eliminated,
2. the possibility of being a stumbling block for the other has been eliminated,
3. the intention is to restore the relationship and re-integrate the offender,
4. the hope is to rejoice when right relationships are restored,
5. the expectation is for the Spirit of Jesus to be present,
6. the commitment is to not give up, and
7. the goal is the re-establishing of shalom in the church.

The Process (vv. 15-17)

When the preparation is complete, Matthew 18: 15-17 provides a step-by-step process that might be referred to as a controlled escalation process. But even though it is an escalating process, it is important to remember that *all* steps in the process have the goal of re-establishing shalom.

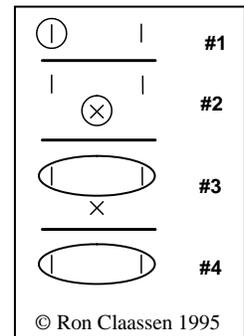
15 ‘If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (NRSV)

What I discovered, to my delight, was that the “Four Options Model” can assist in illustrating this process. It didn’t surprise me because I think that the Model simply illustrates part of God’s wonderful creation.

Step One:

15 “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.” (NRSV)

Step one is option #4. The advice for the one who has been “sinned against” is to go to the other. Then the two alone, without any outside help, start by the one who was “sinned against” describing the violation and the other listening. This is very similar to the first step in the “Peacemaking Model” described above. We might even extend it to suggest that they talk about the problem and listen to each other. While it doesn’t actually say that they would then attempt to “restore equity” and “clarify future intentions” as suggested in the “Peacemaking Model,” my experience in working with people in conflict is that, if they respectfully describe their experiences and perspectives and each listens and tries to understand the other’s experiences and perceptions, they spontaneously want to repair the damages and clarify how they could prevent it from happening again. It is important to remember that this kind of process only happens when the intention is to search for a constructive resolution or agreement that will re-establish shalom relationships.

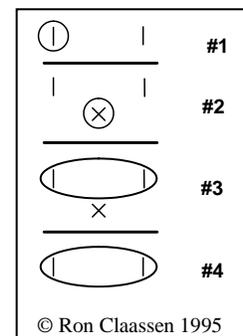


The preparation instruction to the one who has been “sinned against” is to not even approach the other until having examined one’s own motives for confronting the other, and not confront the other until one is clear that:

1. the motivation to prove who is greatest has been eliminated,
2. the possibility of being a stumbling block for the other has been eliminated,
3. the intention is to restore the relationship and re-integrate the offender,
4. the hope is to rejoice when right relationships are restored,
5. the expectation is for the Spirit of Jesus to be present,
6. the commitment is to not give up, and
7. the goal is the re-establishing of shalom in the church.

The other, the one being confronted, will then need to decide about their willingness to search for a way to restore the relationship. The passage says the evidence of this will be willingness to listen. Listening does not mean agree, but it does mean to hear in a way that includes acknowledging the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of the other(s). If the one being confronted is willing to listen, the passage says, “You have regained that one” and the celebrating can begin. It doesn’t mean that all of the work is done. There may still be many details to discuss, agreements to be made and follow-up meetings needed to consider if the agreements are working. If they are working then it is time for further celebration. If they are not, and if people are still willing to listen to each other, this is also cause for celebration and time for further detail work.

The passage also suggests that there may be times when the one being confronted will not “listen.” This would mean that the offender is not willing to hear and try to understand the experiences, thoughts and

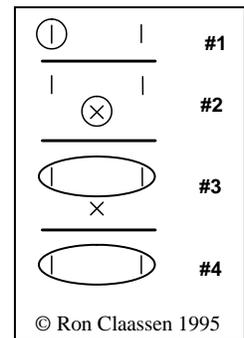


feelings of the one confronting. When that happens the confronter moves to step two. The temptation in the face of this rejection is to move from doing a #4 to a #1. Some ways to do a #1 would be to reject the other in return, to try to make the other look bad in front of others, to try to punish the other, or perhaps to just give up and resolve it with distance. But if the confronter has done adequate preparation, the confronter will not move from a #4 to a #1 but rather to a #3 which is step two in the Matthew 18 process.

Step Two:

16 “But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” (NRSV)

Step two is option #3. The primary work is still between the two but they do this in the presence of “X,” one or two witnesses. It would appear that the purpose of the additional people is to add to the witness, to observe for the purpose of increasing the accountability of both parties. I have observed that people who have a very difficult time talking with just the two of them together, are more reasonable, kind, and clear about their experiences and preferences when people they respect are present. To be credible witnesses, they would have to be people who are seen in the eyes of both parties as people of integrity who are open to observing and reporting what they observe without bias. They would have to be people who have, as their motive for participating, a desire to help the parties really listen to each other. Both parties would know these “witnesses” are advocates for each of them. They would know these “witnesses” are people who value *shalom* relationships.



It would also be important that the witnesses prepare themselves just as the one who was confronting. They would prepare through self examination and know they are ready to be witnesses when:

1. the motivation to prove who is greatest has been eliminated,
2. the possibility of being a stumbling block for the other has been eliminated,
3. the intention is to restore the relationship and re-integrate the offender,
4. the hope is to rejoice when right relationships are restored,
5. the expectation is for the Spirit of Jesus to be present,
6. the commitment is to not give up, and
7. the goal is the re-establishing of shalom in the church.

It may be that in the presence of these witnesses, the one doing the confronting will do it in a way that makes it clearer and less accusatory, or in some other way easier for the one being confronted to listen. Or it may be that in the presence of these witnesses, the one being confronted is willing to listen even though he was not willing to listen when just the two of them were together. Or it may be that while the one being confronted could not “listen” to the one who was “sinned against,” the person being confronted might be willing to listen to the witnesses. Sometimes it is easier to hear the other’s perspective if it is told initially by one who is not so directly involved. Maybe the offender will be able to hear it from one of the witnesses. It is not uncommon for the listener, when hearing the other’s perspective in different words and from a different person, to say, “is that what you were saying?”

This step of the process, having witnesses who have a role but are not the ones directly involved, is a #3. The role of the witnesses is to help the parties in the conflict listen to each other. There are no guarantees of agreement even with these witnesses involved. If the offender listens, the celebration begins.

This step, having witnesses, also suggests that there may be times when the one being confronted will still not “listen.” When this happens, the process moves on to step three. Having observed the unwillingness of the one being confronted, the temptation may be for the witnesses to join with the one confronting and do #1. They might be tempted to try to publicly shame or punish the other, or they might give up on the other. But at this point it is very important that the confronter and the witnesses recall their preparation:

1. the motivation to prove who is greatest has been eliminated,
2. the possibility of being a stumbling block for the other has been eliminated,
3. the intention is to restore the relationship and re-integrate the offender,
4. the hope is to rejoice when right relationships are restored,
5. the expectation is for the Spirit of Jesus to be present,
6. the commitment is to not give up, and
7. the goal is the re-establishing of shalom in the church.

Remembering this preparation, they move to the next step in the controlled escalation.

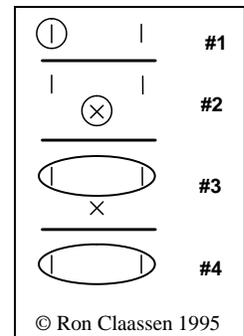
Step Three:

¹⁷ “If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” (NRSV)

Step three can have two parts. The first part continues the process of step two (option #3) but with a larger group of witnesses. The controlled escalation continues and with the same purpose in mind, to restore shalom. The role of the church in this first part of step three is to enlarge the group of witnesses. This means that church members who will be present will need to do the same self examination and be ready to make the same constructive commitment as the confronter and the earlier witnesses.

1. the motivation to prove who is greatest has been eliminated,
2. the possibility of being a stumbling block for the other has been eliminated,
3. the intention is to restore the relationship and re-integrate the offender,
4. the hope is to rejoice when right relationships are restored,
5. the expectation is for the Spirit of Jesus to be present,
6. the commitment is to not give up, and
7. the goal is the re-establishing of shalom in the church.

The hope in this first part of Step Three is that with the larger number present and their encouragement the offender will listen. The goal remains the same. The role for the church at this stage of Step Three is to observe, listen, and speak to encourage and help the offender to listen.

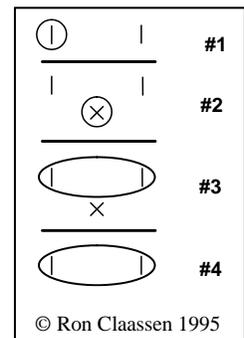


If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, then the church resists the temptation to hurt, punish, or give up on the offender. Instead, the controlled escalation moves to the second part of Step Three and the church becomes the “X” in Option #2 and renders an opinion or judgment. They do not make a judgment about whether one is right or wrong or if one has violated a particular law or rule. The decision they are asked to make, as a church, is if the offender is continuing to refuse to listen. The hope is that in hearing the judgment of the church, a group that includes a significant number of people who are known and respected, the attitude and openness of the one being confronted will change. If the offender listens, they celebrate. If the offender doesn’t listen, they are instructed to move on to the next step in the controlled escalation.

Step Four:

¹⁷ “If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” (NRSV)

The controlled escalation continues. At this point the temptation to punish or give up on the offender is even greater. But the goal has not changed. And those conveying the decision to the offender must have completed again the same preparation. Step Four is a #1. But it is interesting that the language is to “let (emphasis mine) such a one be to you...” It is not “make such a one be to you...” After all of the other Steps, it is now clear that the “offender” has refused to listen and, in that act, separated from the church. The church now acknowledges and names the current situation. The offender, by refusing to listen, has done a #1 (with the offender in the circle and the church outside the circle). In this fourth step, the church responds with a #1 (the church in the circle and the offender outside the circle). The church acknowledges that by refusing to listen, the offender has separated from the church because listening is the foundation of being in right relations with each other and with God. The way this is communicated is critical.



A #1 can be done in ways that are respectful, reasonable, restorative, and intended to reintegrate, or it can be done in ways that are disrespectful, unreasonable, hurtful, and intended to create distance. The question then, is how the “offender” should be treated in this step of the process and after the process is completed. Jesus’ instructions were to “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” What the text does not address is “a Gentile and a tax collector” from who’s perspective.

Should the church treat the “offender” as Jesus treated the Gentiles and tax collectors or as the mainstream religious leaders of Jesus’ time treated them? Jesus acknowledged Gentiles and tax collectors as people of infinite worth. Jesus treated them as people of dignity. He valued them, ate with them, and cared enough to encourage them to consider what God would want them to do. The main-stream religious leaders of the Jews at that time made sure Gentiles and tax collectors were seen as outsiders. They kept their distance and treated them poorly.

Given that “The Process” is recorded as one of Jesus’ teachings, I think the intention of this step is to acknowledge the offender’s refusal to listen, to treat the offender in ways that continue to value the person, and continue to invite the offender to

listen. The church should continue to demonstrate caring in ways that are respectful, reasonable, and intended to restore shalom relationships.

When Matthew 18 is applied in the reconciling spirit of Christ, it is not something to be feared or avoided, but is simply an integral part of caring for the members of the church.