

‘70 x 7’?: Lessons on Forgiveness from an Historical Reading of Matthew 18

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Abstract

‘Forgive 70 times 7’ and the ‘Three Step Rule’ principle of reconciliation is praised as hands-on ‘biblical’ advice, but for many victims it increases the abuse as they are forced to recall their gruesome experience and evaluate their own fault in what happened. Often quick solutions for complicated issues are forced on the victim by the church’s divine power of ‘tying and untying’ (Matt 18:18). Many victims leave their churches and sometimes God. In his recent book, *Introducing Christian Ethics: Core Convictions for Christians Today* (Front Edge, 2022), David Gushee points to the inadequacy of this ‘biblical’ doctrine of forgiveness, and suggests broader ethical research into the subject. However, I believe that a re-reading of the texts from the historical critical method, may bring such necessary broadening. This article, then, reads Matthew chapters 18–19 as an extension of Mark 9–10, scrutinising in the process contemporary applications of these texts.

Key words

Matthew 18; forgiveness; cultures of secrecy; power in the church

Introduction

Boards of Christian organisations often have the ‘Forgive 70 times 7’ principle and the ‘Three Step Rule’ of reconciliation in their manuals of conduct. It is hands-on ‘biblical’ advice. Churches rarely admit that this actually increases the abuse of victims by making them recall their distressing experience and evaluate their own fault in what happened, while they are also forced to accept quick solutions for complicated

issues, which creates cultures of secrecy and trauma.¹ Further mention of the church's divine power of 'tying and untying' (Matt 18:18), or 'binding and loosing', adds spiritual abuse to the ordeal. No wonder many leave their churches and sometimes God, because they have suffered too much pain.² In his recent book, David Gushee points to the inadequacy of this 'biblical' doctrine of forgiveness,³ and suggests broader ethical research into the subject. However, I believe that a re-reading of the texts featuring the historical critical method, may bring about the necessary broadening. The goal of this article is, therefore, to re-read Jesus's instructions on forgiveness as remembered in the Gospel according to Matthew chapters 18–19, particularly because of their popularity in comparison to Mark's version. At the same time, the article also scrutinises contemporary applications of these texts.

This article reads Matthew 18:12–35 in comparison with Mark 9–10, presupposing Mark's priority,⁴ first by applying form criticism and then redaction criticism to draw conclusions. In so doing, we find that the theme of forgiveness is Matthew's supplement to Mark's narrative about Jesus teaching his disciples greatness in the kingdom of God, which is achieved only by ministry to the 'little ones'. The main question is why Matthew thinks the supplement about reconciliation and

¹ To feature just a few, see the final report on Ravi Zacharias in *Report of Independent Investigation into Sexual Misconduct of Ravi Zacharias*, by Linsey M. Barron and William P. Eisenstein of Miller and Martin PLLC, 9 February 2021 <<https://www.courthousenews.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/zacharias-report.pdf>> [accessed 27 March, 2024] or 'The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill' *Christianity Today*, podcast series, 2021 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/>> [accessed 20 March, 2024]. Marc Driscoll subsequently 'rebranded' his 'ministry' after leaving Mars Hill in 2014. See Chris Moody, 'Mark Driscoll's Safe Space', *Religion Unplugged*, 2 October 2023 <<https://religionunplugged.com/news/2023/6/20/mark-driscolls-safe-space-in-arizona-2zzze>> [accessed 20 March, 2024].

² Between the two censuses in Croatia, 8% of Catholics completely dissociated themselves from the church. This coincides with the scandals of sexual sin against children. To leave Catholicism in Croatia means a major identity overhaul, as religious identity is linked to nationality. A. Ž. For Hina, 'Katolika u Hrvatskoj ima sve manje, a raste broj ateista: Kako stoje druge religije?' *Dnevnik.hr*, 22 September 2022 <<https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/katolika-u-hrvatskoj-ima-sve-manje-a-raste-broj-ateista-kako-stoje-ostale-religije---743522.html>> [accessed 27 March 2024].

³ David P. Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics: Core Convictions for Christians Today* (Front Edge, 2022), pp. 143–154.

⁴ For a strong case for Markan priority against newer attempts to deny it, see Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 2nd edn (Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 40–56.

forgiveness is needed here. We will conclude that in 18:13–18, Matthew offers Jesus’s teaching on forgiveness as a solution to Mark’s implied question on how peace can be maintained in the church after a violation of the ‘little ones’, by which the ‘saltiness’ of the church has been jeopardised (Mark 9:50). The pericopes inserted by Matthew form a thematic whole and need to be seen in relation to each other.

From a practical theological perspective, this article deals with power abuse in the church, a problem that has recently been raised by numerous cases hitting even the global secular press. In the article I refer to the victims as the ‘little ones’. This may mean the powerless party in a particular conflict, not necessarily a completely disadvantaged person. However, it is a fact that the more abuse of a certain kind is ignored, the more the victims become marginalised, that is, deprived of a place to speak up and have their needs met.

In a similar way, I use ‘bully’, ‘perpetrator’, ‘narcissist’, or even ‘predator’ interchangeably.⁵ As has recently been noted by the psychologist and Evangelical theologian James Wilder, all people have narcissist tendencies and are inclined to impose their will on others to a smaller or larger extent.⁶ In theology this may be called original sin, and

⁵ An internet search into relevant material leads to the conclusion that a narcissist tendency (not to mention personality disorder) creates violent, manipulative (passive aggressive and gaslighting) behaviours. See Dru Ahlborg and Tom Ahlborg, ‘Gaslighting and Bullying’, The Bullying Recovery Resource Center, n.d. <<https://bullyingrecoveryresourcecenter.org/our-board/>> [accessed 25 June 2024]. This article defines both gaslighting and bullying as a problem of power abuse. When I refer to narcissists, I usually think about tendencies and not about the personality disorder. However, as is evident from literature, both use the same methods to subdue others. Wilder points out that churches are better suited for building narcissism than loving enemies. E. James Wilder, *The Pandora Problem: Facing Narcissism in Leaders and Ourselves* (Deeper Walk International, 2018) pp. 20–21; e-book <<https://www.everand.com/read/398170232/The-Pandora-Problem-Facing-Narcissism-in-Leaders-Ourselves>> 2024, p. 41. The pathological narcissist’s self-esteem depends on outside affirmation, as they are full of self-doubt in themselves. Cf. Elinor Greenberg, *Borderline, Narcissistic, And Schizoid Adaptations: The Pursuit of Love, Admiration, and Safety* (Greenbrook Press, 2016), p. 244. No wonder that research conducted in 2013 by Glenn Ball and Darrell Puls shows that at least one in three pastors has Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). Darrell Puls and Glenn Ball, *Let Us Prey: The Plague of Narcissist Pastors and What We Can Do About It* (Wipf and Stock, 2017), cited by Jeff Mattas, ‘The Iceberg of Narcissism in Pastoral Leadership’, Indiana Ministries, 20 March 2021 <<https://indianaministries.org/innnews/the-iceberg-of-narcissism-in-pastoral-leadership/>> [accessed 1 July 2024].

⁶ Wilder, *The Pandora Problem*, pp. 20–21.

its prescribed treatment is spiritual, while often the implications of it in the now stay unresolved. Wilder interestingly notes that a community is needed to challenge narcissist tendencies in their beginnings before a permanent narcissistic response is entrenched in a person as a disorder, and/or a social culture is created in which narcissists cannot recognise the harm they do because the roles have been exchanged and victims who speak up are considered the problem. Interestingly, professionally diagnosed narcissists are usually dropped as patients by therapists. The profession considers them incurable.⁷

I also use ‘violence’ and ‘abuse’ not only for physical and sexual abuse, but along the line of the United Nation’s definition for anything that harms people:

Violence is [...] ‘the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, *psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation*’.⁸ (emphasis mine)

I may disagree with ‘the intentional’ use of power — as it seems to me that the unintentional abuse of power is indicative of privilege blindness to deprivation or neglect. The World Health Organisation *Report on Violence and Health* from 2002 shows graphically the extent and the depths of violence,⁹ illustrating how physical or sexual abuse, the consequences of which are readily recognisable, is exceeded by other, invisible acts of violence such as psychological violence and deprivation which are difficult to prove, especially in cultures which accept certain types of violence as ‘normal’. Therefore, more recently, emphasis has been placed on definitions of the psychological means by which violence

⁷ Wilder, *The Pandora Problem*, p. 20. See also Greenberg, *Borderline, Narcissistic, And Schizoid Adaptations*, p. 243, where she explains why most therapists feel overwhelmed with narcissist disorder patients.

⁸ Alison Rutherford, Anthony B. Zwi, Natalie J. Grove, and Alexander Butchart, ‘Violence: A Glossary’, *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 61.8 (2007), pp. 676–680 (p. 677), doi:10.1136/jech.2005.043711. Cf. Etienne G. Krug, Linda L. Dahlberg, James A. Mercy, Anthony B. Zwi, and Rafael Lozano, *World Report on Violence and Health* (World Health Organization, 2002) p. 7.

⁹ The striking figure illustrating a ‘Typology of Violence’ can be found in Krug et al., *World Report on Violence and Health*, or accessed online at <<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9241545615>> [accessed 2 October 2024].

is committed. The relationship between a bully (perpetrator) and manipulation, and more specifically gaslighting, is evident and can be described as follows:

As bullying is an exploitation of a power imbalance with the intent to harm, gaslighting is a method the aggressor can choose to bully someone else. These tactics are sometimes difficult to identify, especially in relation to a bully and his or her target. Highly successful bullies are crafty at manipulating and can be masters of gaslighting.¹⁰

Retaining Saltiness as the Goal

Reading the Markan framework on Christian leadership is mandatory for theologians interested in the Matthean reconciliation and forgiveness passages as it presupposes power imbalances, typical of all aspects of violence and abuse, not just physical. Matthew's material fits well with Mark's general theme about minding the little ones as a mark of greatness in God's kingdom.¹¹ Table 1 compares the sequence and use of the pericopes in Mark and Matthew to show where Matthew intervenes.

Reading Matthew alongside Mark suggests that the inserted material forms a thematic whole concerning reconciliation and forgiveness in the church. The transition to the first subject of reconciliation in Matthew feels like an 'awkward fit',¹² at least until one recognises the importance of 'ekklesia' as a *corpus permixtum*, a 'place where good and evil exist side by side until judgment',¹³ as Luz suggests. In other words, the Matthean church belongs at the same time to the ideal of the kingdom of God and to the earthly realm, where a breach of divine standards is common. Matthew recognises how this dual character causes problems for his church. His additions feature aspects

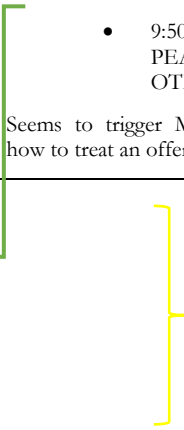
¹⁰ Ahlborg and Ahlborg, 'Bullying and Gaslighting'.

¹¹ I follow the main thrust of the text and compare pericopes, but there is a lot of detail that should be added from a more thorough comparison of all Matthean interventions, as notably evident from the commentary by Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2 (Augsburg, 1989), pp. 431–551 to which the reader is kindly referred. Available also online through *Internet Archive*.

¹² For example, Luz, *Matthew*, p. 451, says that it 'fits awkwardly into the text'.

¹³ Luz, *Matthew*, p. 451.

Table 1: A Synoptic Reading of Matthew 18–19 (Mark 8–10)

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| <p>Matt 18:1–5. Who is the greatest in the KoG? Caring for a child is a mark of greatness.</p> | <p>Mark 9:33, 37. Who is the greatest in the KoG? Caring for a child (little ones) is a mark of greatness.</p> |
| | <p>Mark 9:38–40. For example, those who do not ‘walk with us’ but belong to us.</p> |
| <p>Matt 18:6–14. Offending the little ones.</p> | <p>Mark 9:41–50. Offending the little ones.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Salt logion • 9:50 — HOW TO HAVE PEACE WITH EACH OTHER <p>Seems to trigger Matthew’s elaboration on how to treat an offender.</p> |
| <p>Matt 18:15–19, 21. Forgiveness and the Kingdom of Heaven.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15–20: How to find reconciliation in the church when someone sins against you. • Logion about tying and untying (binding and loosing). • Logion about two or three praying. • 21–35: How many times one ought to forgive in a day. • The Parable of the Merciless Debtor. <p>Seems to warn against abuse of power of ‘binding and loosing’.</p> |  |
| <p>Matt 19:1–12. On divorce.</p> | <p>Mark 10: 1–12. On divorce.</p> |
| <p>Matt 19:13–15. The little children (again).</p> | <p>Mark 10:13–16. The little children (again).</p> |
| <p>Matt 19:16–30. The rich young man.</p> | <p>Mark 10:17–31. The rich young man.</p> |
| <p>Matt 20:1–16. The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard.</p> | |
| <p>Matt 20:17–19. Jesus announces his death for the third time.</p> | <p>Mark 10:32–34. Jesus announces his death for the third time.</p> |
| <p>Matt 20:20–28. Zebedee’s sons want to be the greatest.</p> | <p>Mark 10:35–44. Zebedee’s sons want to be the greatest.</p> |
| <p>Conclusion: Matt 20:29–34. Two blind men in Jericho.</p> | <p>Conclusion: Mark 10:46–51. The blind man in Jericho.</p> |

of how the church should handle sin when it happens in their midst, namely (power) abuse or ‘offences’ by the ‘great’ against ‘the little ones’.

Most commentators also recognise that the text itself is ‘victim led’,¹⁴ that is, written from the perspective of the one wronged. This is surprising, given that present day application misreads this detail, and ‘shared guilt’ assumes the centre stage, with the church called in to add objective assessments of who should be held more to blame. This is not what Matthew had in mind.

Matthew works with Mark’s primary concern of servant leadership, as shown in the Messiah’s suffering and death for the people whom the disciples might exclude (like little children).¹⁵ Mark discussed the ideal, and skipped the daily pragmatics of *how* to maintain peace and ‘saltiness’; but Matthew’s concern is precisely with the pragmatics of Christian living in the now. ‘How?’ has high priority and needs to be supplemented by additional Jesus-material from the rich sources Matthew had at hand. Matthew’s insertions are best read as Jesus’s own answers to Mark’s question, ‘If salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?’, elaborating on the command to the disciples to ‘have salt in

¹⁴ The perspective being from the ‘little ones’ is recognised by commentators such as Frank Stagg, ‘Matthew’, *The Broadman Bible Commentary, Volume 8, General Articles: Matthew / Mark*, ed. by J. Allen Clifton (Broadman, 1969), pp. 61–253. Stagg comments, ‘Jesus placed major responsibility for reconciliation upon the one sinned against’ (p. 183). Also, Robert T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (IVP, 1985), pp. 172–173, but he considers that ‘against you’ in 18:15 is ‘probably not an original part of the text’ and hence suggests that Matthew’s text is not about wronging someone, but about committing ‘spiritual’ sin. This shows the two problems in the contemporary reading of the text. One is the lack of consideration of Matthew’s insertions, and the other is the ‘spiritualisation’ of sin as moral failing, failing to recognise the social implications of sin ‘against a brother or sister’ explicitly stated later.

¹⁵ Joel Marcus, *Mark 9–16* (Yale University Press, 2009), writes on p. 589, ‘Throughout the section, the Markan disciples show themselves to be blind — terribly imperceptive and in need of the illumination of Jesus’ teaching. They ask inane questions (9.10–11; 10.10), make stupid remarks (9:5–6), grasp for personal power (9.33–34; 10.35–40), mistake the merciful nature of Jesus’ mission (9.38), and otherwise show themselves deficient in appreciating the unique way in which God’s dominion is manifesting itself through Jesus (8.31–33; 9.32; 10.13–14, 24, 26, 32).’ Regardless of seeing Mark as a liturgical mystery (*Mark 1–8*, p. 69), Marcus still recognises the *Sitz im Leben* for the gospel of the ‘overwhelmed’ Markan Christians ‘by their present situation of “tribulation such as has not been from the beginning of creation”’ (*Mark 1–8*, p. 79).

yourselves, and be at peace with one another' (Mark 9:50).¹⁶ Matthew's supplement becomes Jesus's pragmatic answer to how peace is maintained after the treachery of abuse and to how the church can continue to function as 'salt'.¹⁷

A Closer Look at Matthew's Insertions

Going into the details of Matthew's amendments of Mark goes beyond the confines of this article, but even Matthew's major points can set us on the right track. Matthew moves the 'salt logion' from the context in Mark 9–10, pulling it forward to the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:13). For Matthew this is Jesus's 'manifesto, a promising theory'.¹⁸ And yet Matthew seems to comment precisely on Mark 9:50, which he has displaced but then replaced with the catena of reconciliation and forgiveness pericopes: if the disciples cannot maintain 'saltiness'¹⁹ by having 'peace' among themselves, it will be impossible for the world to 'taste' the kingdom of God, or to recognise the church as a place where God is present in the world. Matthew's reconciliation and forgiveness story pragmatically broadens Mark's ethical one-liner.

The threat to the community is real and frustrating. After all, even the best — such as the 'Sons of Thunder' (Mark 3:17, cf. 10:35–37) — have their spiritual black-outs, imposing themselves over others and creating discord. Our translations render *σκανδαλιζω* (Matt 18:6)

¹⁶ It is difficult to determine whether Mark 9:50 is a logion, i.e. Jesus's own word, or Mark's editorial instruction to his own church (Marcus, *Mark 9–16*, p. 694). Either way, it is the climax of the passage (so Marcus, *Mark 9–16*, p. 699).

¹⁷ Marcus, *Mark 9–16*, pp. 692–693 has a thorough review of what 'salt' could mean in this text, concluding that it probably means Christian wisdom which rejects selfish ambition (p. 699).

¹⁸ France, *Matthew*, p. 106.

¹⁹ Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, p. 698, claims that the difference in the Greek between *ἐαυτοῖς* in 'have salt in yourselves' and *ἀλλήλοις* in 'be at peace among yourselves' is important, as *ἐν ἐαυτοῖς* must mean having the wisdom to discern the right Christian attitude in the individual to create peace in the community 'among themselves'. Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek Lexicon at Bible Hub* <<https://biblehub.com/greek/1438.htm>>, leaning on Augustus Matthiae, *A Copious Greek Grammar* (Murray, 1832), p. 818 § 489 III, suggests however that *ἐν ἐαυτοῖς* and *ἐν ἀλλήλοις* 'is used frequently in the plural for the reciprocal pronoun *ἀλλήλων, ἀλλήλοις, ἀλλήλους*'. It is therefore possible to take the 'having salt' (the taste of the kingdom of heaven) and 'having peace among each other' as parallel. In this case, salt is read as the 'taste' which this world is lacking but that Christians have, just as they are also light in the darkness (Matt 5:13–16). By pulling 'salt' into the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew makes this more than just wisdom to discern and live rightly; he makes it a decisive feature of the church.

against a ‘little one’ as ‘causing offence’ and ‘leading into sin’. Craig Blomberg rightly notes that *σκανδαλιζω* ‘speaks of something that is destructive of human life or the life of the entire people of God’. When the ‘little ones’ lose their faith in the church, they are also likely to doubt God, putting their (eternal) lives in danger.²⁰ Matthew believes, it seems, that this can only be undone by forgiveness.

Forgiving ‘70 times 7’ in Matthew must not be taken out of the context of the other pericopes on exerting power in a worldly way (Mark’s context), and must be seen in the context of the other Matthean pericopes in Matthew 18:15–35. ‘Stumbling blocks’ are created by the powerful who hurt those entrusted to them. Offence does not happen among equals. ‘Everyone is equally sinful’ is a plausible orthodox line in strict theology, but it concerns the human relationship with God. In human conflicts, there is no shared guilt. There is always a perpetrator and a victim. The guilty party is the one who has overstepped their authority and abused their power to hurt someone with less power.

Recognising the forms of the ancient church’s oral tradition, we can identify two major stories in Matthew’s insertion. First there is the three step reconciliation pericope (Matt 18:15–17), aided by two *logia*: that of the right to bind and loose (Matt 18:18) and that of the ‘two or three assembled because of Christ’ (Matt 18:19–20). On the other hand, there is Peter’s interjection about forgiveness 70 times 7 (18:21–22) as illustrated by the parable of the ‘unmerciful servant’ (18:23–35). While the two parts (of reconciliation and forgiveness) go together, they first need to be viewed separately.

²⁰ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew* (Broadman, 1992), p. 274; for more detail also Luz, *Matthew*, pp. 432–433.

Reconciliation: A Victim-lead Process

Matthew insists that the duty to confront a perpetrator belongs to the victims (Matt 18:15).²¹ We have seen that sinning against someone is always a matter of power imbalance and power abuse in a relationship. It happens either due to a failure to appreciate the human dignity of the victim, in a self-absorbed, unconscious crusade to pursue one's own promotion/will/plan, where casualties, like the 'little ones', are easily overlooked. Or, on the other hand, it happens as part of an intentional, unjust campaign against someone for the perpetrator's own gain. Gain can be defined broadly as material, social, emotional, and even spiritual privilege.

Abusers often abuse quietly, behind the scenes, by intricate schemes of manipulation, always counting on the culture of secrecy in their church, which makes violence hard to recognise. The more the experienced perpetrators are engaged in abuse, the less they expect their actions to escalate into the public sphere and earn them judgement. They have learned to count on their victims' silence. The world and churches that buy into the worldly norms of leadership groom people into considering 'minor' abuse as normal.²² 'Minor' is defined by society's level of tolerance of abuse.²³ Tolerance of violence, and even lack of knowledge of what violence is, makes even the perpetrators sometimes blind to the offence they cause. The victims feel violated but are reminded that 'nothing happened' and that their inner compass is misleading them. They grow confused and conflicted.

²¹ I use the language of victim and abuser to give a contemporary face to the 'outdated' and spiritualised concept of sin as an offence against God (alone), which in the minds of Christians and non-Christians alike has been emptied of all physical implications, and hence also of importance for life. But sin belongs to the earth and shows itself by its murdering intent. This is why I see it appropriate to speak here of the abused/victim and of the perpetrator/abuser. When a brother 'sins' against you, he attacks your life!

²² The biblical text does not specify abuse, yet Jesus's anger at the disciples who were preventing mothers and little children from coming to him should qualify this behaviour as abuse (cf. Mark 10:14). The Bible has a great deal to say about 'minor', 'private' issues and their outcomes. The outstanding example is where the abuse of a partner by a Levite develops into several wars with tens of thousands of dead (see Judges 19–21).

²³ Some of this is evident from traditional concepts such as 'boys will be boys' — which means that abuse is tolerated as normal (in particular) male behaviour.

For all these reasons, Matthew is right: only the victim can name the violent act and confront the bully. The victim's experience of pain is real, and sometimes the only sign of abuse, and should be treated as such by the church. Churches add structural abuse to a victim's pain through traditional cultures of secrecy and lack of knowledge concerning the nature of abuse, but especially when they side with perpetrators rather than with the victims. When the victim's feelings have been declared inadequate because they are subjective — that is, the victim's experience of hurt is declared insufficient — the absence of 'objective' evidence will lead to a decision that no violence happened. Often the victims are then even forced to apologise to the perpetrator for their 'overreaction' and for reporting the abuse to the church (board). Indirectly, victims are declared to be liars.

Forgiveness as Growing from the Reconciliation Process

Matthew's victim-lead three-step reconciliation process is jeopardised at the outset in contexts where the victims' subjective experience is denied, and worse, where people have learned not to challenge abusers in church because this will only make things worse. This is tragic, not only for the victims, but also because it threatens the health of the whole church. When victims, the 'little ones', are judged like this, the church has already sided with the powerful. Righteousness and peace have been transformed into rationalisation and secrecy. Suppressed hurt nevertheless continues to burn and hurt the victims, and, as Blomberg notes, this can bring a spiritual death.²⁴ In addition, unchallenged abuse encourages the abuser to continue with more vigour, rationalising and even spiritualising away their sin. Churches that support perpetrators may still pay lip service to their openness to complaints, but everyone knows that silence is golden. Pain cannot be judged objectively from the outside.

Resolving the Issue Privately

Note how Jesus's first instance in Matthew 18:15 is a private confrontation and how it presupposes an equity of power and status.

²⁴ Blomberg, *Matthew*, p. 27.

The one-on-one confrontation presupposes a healthy and sincere Christian culture, where hurt and evil were probably unintended. All of us make short-sighted decisions which hurt others. Even if evil was committed on purpose, a change of mind may be expected from a heart-to-heart conversation between Christians. The pain we inflict on others stirs empathy when we recognise it. Reconciliation is immediate. The victim, who has been degraded in the conflict, reclaims her power by challenging the perpetrator because she knows her community supports victims and she presupposes good intentions.

But in unsafe places, where the victims feel a confrontation with the bully is dangerous or senseless and nobody will hear them, the community has already been groomed by the ‘elephant in the room’,²⁵ as Wilder has recently put it. That is, the community already caters to the bully and not to the victim. Victims, of course, are far easier to handle and silence than bullies, especially if the bullies are narcissists. But the sort of peace that grows from silencing the victims is not real. It is bound to bound to shatter eventually, bringing mayhem to the church.

Calling in Others

Where the church allows platforms for victims to speak, the chances are that most conflicts and hurts will be resolved and amends made at a personal level. There will be no need to involve others. Yet, when a personal confrontation brings no reconciliation, that is, when the perpetrator is unwilling to admit to hurting their victim, it is the victim’s (and not the perpetrator’s!) right and task to call in a mediator or two to help them in the confrontation (Matt 18:16). This is what Matthew hears Jesus say. Again, the chances are that a witness will tip the scales and the bully will recognise their deed, repent, compensate for it, and be forgiven. Note that witnesses in Jesus’s instruction add weight to the victim’s scale and not to the perpetrator’s. They are not there to judge ‘objectively’ as to how guilt is shared, but to stand in for the victim. The

²⁵ ‘Yet if, like Pandora, we keep the cover on these same topics, we leave hope trapped in silence [...] We say there is an “elephant in the room” or we are “opening a can of worms.” Everyone sees the problem, but great dread comes upon all who consider mentioning it. We have learned from experience that these topics are explosive and best left untouched.’ (Wilder *The Pandora Problem*, p. 13.)

slight power imbalance in favour of the victim should help the perpetrator to see the other side better and learn empathy. But — realistically — Jesus and Matthew also know that sometimes a third option will be needed for the unrepentant perpetrator. This is where Matthew expects the whole church to step in and support the victim.

Forgiveness as the Task of the Whole Church

There is a difference between Matthew's church and ours today. Matthew's is still a house church of dedicated believers, and not hundreds or thousands only mildly, if at all, interested in the everyday affairs of the community. Matthew's church is not an institution or hierarchy of the post-Constantine type, which divides 'the church' (hierarchy) from the 'laity' altogether.²⁶ For Matthew, *ekklesia* is the coming together of practising, dedicated believers who have made a public, personal decision to follow Jesus. Both the victim and the perpetrator belong to that same community. This church is a communal place of training in holiness for the kingdom of God. Blomberg suggests that by bringing a cause to the church, Matthew means that 'a grievance is made more public',²⁷ that the injustice against a 'little one' becomes a community issue. The community cannot back off as if this were a private matter that concerns only the two people directly involved. In this way, things change dramatically. God's *ekklesia* must speak up against the injustice done to the victim, as injustice damages the tapestry of the church's Christ-culture. When churches tolerate injustice, they add hurt to victims, but they also add power to incorrigible bullies. Only the church can teach the incorrigible bully 'saltiness' and 'peace' as it

²⁶ Pope Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 21 November 1964 <https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html> [accessed 20 March 2024] (chapters III–IV). This document makes a distinction, following the apostolic succession, between the church (described in chapter 3) and 'Laity' (chapter 4) to the extent of concealing what laity means to the 'Church'. So, e.g., Humphrey Chinedu Anamaye in 'Contemporary Theological Reflection on the Laity', *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 83.4 (2007), pp. 445–470, doi: 10.2143/ETL.83.4.2025349. Anamaye comments, 'Today, after the great hopes that followed the Council, we are still laden with numerous difficulties [...]. Some have attributed this problem to the deep divergences on the interpretation of the Council, its teaching and overall significance [...]. Others ascribe the problem to the ambiguity of the orientation inherent in the documents of the Council themselves' (p. 445).

²⁷ Blomberg, *Matthew*, p. 278, although he also thinks that this is done for the purpose of resolving the 'co-dependent' perspective of the one grieved.

insists on their shared Christ-culture. Wilder is right in claiming that the community is key in healing narcissism in all stages. That is why in Matthew's report, both judgement and forgiveness are transferred from the victim to the community (Matt 18:17–20) and Jesus addresses the issues of the perpetrator and not of the victim. After all personal resources have failed to get the bully to repent, the church steps in to sanction the bully. This lifts the burden of the conflict from the victim. The bully has been identified, called out, and sanctioned. Even if the bully never repents, justice is achieved for the victim as their pain has been acknowledged. We can say that by handing the issue over to the church, the victim has forgiven the perpetrator. From that moment on, the victim is no longer involved in the sanctioning process as an individual but only as a member of the community of Christ.

Excommunicating or Forgiving?

Some contemporary readers may be surprised at this victim-centred process where two or three witnesses are enough to make a case against a perpetrator in the church.²⁸ But two or three are enough because, as Matthew insists, Jesus is there (Matt 18:20). The presence of Jesus among his disciples is decisive to the process of reconciliation. Ulrich Luz urges that the three-step challenge to power abuse must be read together with the two logia that follow, although they seem only loosely connected.²⁹ The first about 'binding and loosing' is easier to interpret. In 'binding and loosing', the church needs God's presence for their decisions, especially if they are also valid 'in heaven' (Matt 18:18). While in Eastern Europe 'in heaven' is usually interpreted as the church's power to excommunicate someone for eternity, Luz names four possible interpretations for the excommunication.³⁰ 1) The 'grace model' understands ἐλεγχον (8:15) not as 'reproach' but as 'reason with' or 'convince by reasoning'. This model may sound as if it caters to the perpetrator's interests first, yet the goal is still to persuade the perpetrator of their own guilt. 2) The 'borderline case model', which

²⁸ See similarly also 1 Tim 5:19.

²⁹ Luz, *Matthew*, p. 448.

³⁰ Luz, *Matthew*, pp. 451–452.

would consider excommunication of the perpetrator in 18:18 but only in exceptional cases. However, even that kind of claim terminates the church's 'law of life' and stands in opposition to the later requirement for total forgiveness. 3) For the 'covenant theology model', which treats Matthew 18:20 and Jesus's presence in the church as decisive, the text is read in the context of the New Covenant, which offers forgiveness of all sins but also makes offences against that Covenant extremely serious. By not repenting, the perpetrator demonstrates that in fact they do not belong among Jesus's disciples. 4) The 'inconsistency model', which leaves the inconsistencies as a mystery.

Sometimes we must live with inconsistencies, but not in Matthew 18. Here, the evangelist makes an overarching case³¹ by pulling together the words of Jesus that, for him, adequately explain reconciliation. The process includes addressing the hurt, reconciling, and in the end forgiving the perpetrators, after making them recognise the hurt they have caused and bringing them to repentance. In this case, ἐλέγχω may be understood as 'confront' and 'convince', but also as 'convict'.³² Conviction is not synonymous with shaming. For Jesus and Matthew, the goal is to win over 'your brother or sister' and teach them the mandate to be salt and light in the world together. Luz notes that in both Old and New Testaments, the witnesses' role is in 'warn[ing] the offender about his deed'.³³ After all, if the offender continues in their sin, the bully's eternal fate is at stake. This is why, when the case is brought before the church, it is the perpetrator who is processed and not the victim. The victim's case has been concluded at the second step. But the perpetrator's lack of insight into how they hurt people, which may cause them soon to sin against others, makes them a problem for the church. To keep the peace and maintain saltiness the church must distance an unrepentant bully from the community. Now, how drastic should this distance be?

³¹ Luz, *Matthew*, p. 451.

³² Luz, *Matthew*, p. 451.

³³ Luz, *Matthew*, p. 452. Deuteronomy 19:15 (quoted in Matt 18:16) means strengthening (the victim's) 'word of admonition'.

As 'Gentiles and Tax Collectors'

There is a wide discussion among commentators on the meaning of the 'Gentile and tax collector' (Matt 18:17) as an instruction for treating the unrepentant perpetrator. But Jesus did not reject Gentiles and tax collectors. He ate with them. Luz, among others, draws attention to Matthew's audience as Jewish (Christian), where Jewish tradition may have still been followed and Gentiles and tax collectors simply did not belong. In this case, 'binding and loosing' would mean excommunication. Luz leaves open whether this means eternal or temporal excommunication. But there is also the option to understand those who have been 'untied' or 'loosed' as those who are in need of evangelisation — just like Gentiles and tax collectors. In this case, the debate about eternal excommunication is obsolete.

Declaring someone as 'not belonging' is a decision taken by the whole church. Matthew never mentions church officials or elders' boards, although Matthew's church may have had such leaders.³⁴ This is interesting compared to Matthew 16:19, where it seems this right belongs only to Peter, the Rock (and hence to the hierarchy today). But 18:18 clarifies that the reference to binding and loosing means the church built 'on him' and not Peter himself.³⁵

As Matthew 18:18 does not stand alone³⁶ but is part of Matthew's logia supplementing the pericope on reconciliation and forgiveness, a plausible understanding of the saying must be sought

³⁴ Luz, *Matthew*, p. 452. But he also finds it 'amazing' that Protestants (e.g. Calvin, Bucer, Bullinger, etc.) assume 'the elders' where it says the church (p. 456).

³⁵ It is no surprise that a Catholic reading will understand that '[a]ll of this applies in a particular way to Christ's apostles' (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scriptures Series (Baker Academic, 2010), p. 210), understanding that the rest of the apostles are in a way represented in Peter whom God alone made 'the rock' of his church, and so are their successors (p. 209). Yet the 'two or three gathered in my name' added by Matthew in 18:20 clearly challenge this hierarchical claim. France, *Matthew*, p. 276, notes, 'The Jesus who could speak the words of 28.20 and of whom the name Emmanuel could be used (1.23) here assures his disciples that that great universal truth applies also at the personal level. And that gives a whole new dimension to an apparently insignificant gathering of two or three concerned disciples.' While 16:19 may be stretched one way or another, the implication in 18:20 is clearly church members, and not a particular office.

³⁶ Luz points out that the 'mercy model' (1) would need to be abandoned if Matt 18:18 stood isolated (*Matthew*, p. 455).

from the context. The context is a prayerful process — Matthew 18:19 continues to claim that where two or three prayerfully agree on something (‘in my name’³⁷), it will be done for them ‘by the heavenly Father’. No individual crusades will be granted, whether to the persistent and manipulative perpetrator, or to the victim who may seek revenge rather than reconciliation.³⁸ This provides another reason why only a prayerful community can ‘tie or untie’ perpetrators within their community. The church’s decision regarding the perpetrator (in the form of forgiveness or temporary declaration of not belonging) affirms the victim’s hurt and brings healing. But it also continues to deal with the unrepentant perpetrator, preventing possible individual vendettas. Luz concludes,

The church’s judgment that the ‘snares’ and corrupters are subject to the ‘woes’ of Jesus, the world-judge, can never be an ace with final validity. It can only be an expression of love for the little ones who have been led astray.³⁹

In this way the unrepentant perpetrator too has become a ‘little one’ in need of pastoral care and forgiveness. This coincides nicely with the professional conclusion that the main problem in the narcissist disorder is a strong sense of lack of self-worth.

Forgiveness Contradicts Permanent Excommunication

Arising from the context, another argument that excommunication cannot be permanent is Peter’s interjection. It may be understood as an objection to what seems a permanent excommunication. Literally, Peter’s line is tied to the previous discussion: ‘If my brother sins against me...’ (Matt 18:21) repeats almost verbatim the beginning of the discussion on reconciliation in Matthew 18:15, ‘If your brother or sister sins against you...’,⁴⁰ and can be understood as a question: ‘Did you not

³⁷ Luz, *Matthew*, p. 458, notes that εἰς τὸ ἐμὸν ὄνομα is best translated in line with the Jewish ‘for the sake of’, ‘because of me’. The context of the saying is rabbinic, i.e. Jesus is amending the tradition that God’s Shekinah is among those two or three who sit together with the words of the Law between them (France, *Matthew*, p. 276) to ‘I am among them’.

³⁸ Volf has warned that sooner or later — especially when their case has not been handled properly — victims become perpetrators. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon Press, 1996), pp. 80–82.

³⁹ Luz, *Matthew*, pp. 462–463.

⁴⁰ Matt 18:21: ἀμαρτήσῃ εἰς ἐμὲ ὁ ἀδελφός μου, in comparison with 18:15 ἀμαρτήσῃ εἰς σέ ὁ ἀδελφός σου.

tell us that we must *always* forgive?⁴¹ As such, it would suggest that neither Jesus nor Matthew considered a permanent, eternal excommunication of anyone by the church, especially not for eternity.⁴² When God reconciled the world to himself in Jesus, it was based on his self-giving love. The church is to do likewise. Peter's 'seven times' alludes to perfect forgiveness. Jesus's answer is more than affirmative. It confirms and furthers the divine standard to which any Christ-community should aspire. The kingdom of God is a community of hope, where the incorrigible find correction and consequently also mercy and change. William Herzog draws attention to the 'subversive speech' of the parable of the 'Unforgiving Servant', which Matthew added to Peter's interjection (Matt 18:23–35). Herzog entitled it as 'What if the Messiah Came and Nothing Changed?'⁴³ This captures the

⁴¹ Luz, *Matthew*, p. 465 notes that 'Peter's suggestion is by no means trivial. Seven is the traditional number of perfection. That Peter suggests forgiving seven times does not mean he wants to grant his brother only a limited forgiveness. Instead, the sense of Peter's question is: "Is perfect forgiveness expected of me?"' Luz fails to notice that by this time, Peter knew well what Jesus expected from him. This is why the idea of excommunicating someone raises questions. How can I excommunicate someone, if I am called to forgive always? This is also the point for misunderstandings in a *corpus permixtum*. In the imperfect state, a church needs tools against people who may abuse its mercy by causing pain. To 'untie' is not a punishment but a point at which, after the process of reconciliation exposes the incorrigible offender, the community creates an opportunity for the offender's repentance by setting a boundary. If the offender continues to think that they have done nothing wrong, they must be viewed as someone who does not belong.

⁴² If one examines the history of the reception and interpretation of Matt 18:18, as Luz does, the issue of excommunication as an eternal, social, and even political act of exclusion is possible only where the church and politics have been married. This was called a 'major excommunication', while 'minor' excommunication meant a temporary exclusion from communion dependent on the sacrament of confession. This means that in both cases, Matt 18:18 was understood as the privilege and duty of clergy alone. With the radical reformation's emphasis on individual decision for faith, and a strict division between church and politics, the emphasis moved to where Matthew clearly wanted it — to all Christians in a local community. In these circumstances, Peter's question points to the inevitable fact that excommunication can only be a temporary disciplinary measure for someone who has clearly not learned the rule of the Christ community. For an extensive presentation of both historical issues concerning the historical basis for this logion, as well as a detailed recounting of interpretation history, see Luz, *Matthew*, pp. 448–460.

⁴³ William Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) pp. 131–149.

essence of the problem of excommunication in Matthew 18.⁴⁴ If the church continued to function on legalism, executing permanent judgement and excommunicating offenders, it would not be the community of Jesus's mercy, and Jesus's sacrifice would also have been in vain! John Crossan's conclusion that the servant's 'sheer stupidity' in displaying a lack of understanding about forgiveness 'in such a way, at such a time', clarifies Peter's interjection even more. It is precisely because everything changed with Jesus that the church can always hope that change is possible, even for incorrigible perpetrators.

Conclusion

Matthew's editorial insertions about challenging perpetrators but also forgiving them present a solution to the anticipated breach of community by the sin of the powerful in the *corpus permixtum*. While the victim is called, entitled, and empowered to confront the evil-doer privately, and even to bring in witnesses to help the bully recognise their evil, only the church as a whole can properly deal with an unrepentant sinner by exercising Christian discipline, including temporary excommunication that treats them as in need of evangelism, as someone who has not yet understood the ways of God's kingdom. This is a healing process where the perpetrator learns to see, understand, and affirm that have indeed done injustice to the victim. If the perpetrator cannot learn this lesson, they are probably absorbed in a sort of narcissist condition, and the whole community must step in to guard the victims and discipline the perpetrator.⁴⁵ This process assists the victim in forgiveness, which should be understood as letting go of pursuing their urge for revenge by handing it over to the community.

⁴⁴ Some commentators have objected to the 'king's' final harsh judgement, as J. D. Crossan notes: 'It is one thing to advise forgiveness of others on the model of God's forgiveness of us. [...] It is not the same thing to [...] state that God will not forgive us our unforgiveness' (John D. Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (Polebridge Press, 1992) p. 104). He also thinks that the parable has but one conclusion: 'The emphasis is not on the master's mercy but on servant's lack of mercy and on his sheer stupidity in displaying his lack in such a way at such a time' (p. 105).

⁴⁵ James Wilder insists on the same thing based on his experience in psychotherapy, as shown in *The Pandora Problem*, pp. 24–36.

This reading of Matthew 18:15–35 negates the common contemporary approach in churches, which often shames the victims and denies them a place to confront the evil-doer on the basis of their personal experience of hurt. When the process of reconciliation in the church mimics business procedures, the powerless are blamed, and the powerful are protected. Manipulative tools are used to confuse the victims. These have recently been broadly discussed in psychology and psychotherapy.⁴⁶ Perhaps this history of gaslighting in the church is why most Christians think that Matthew 18 is about a juridical process where the church must judge between equal sinners. Optimistic, democratic ears are surprised to hear that Jesus always sides with the victim's story, including in Matthew 18. There is no objectivity in victimisation.⁴⁷

Matthew's three-step reconciliation naturally rules out the fast fixes that are commonly imposed on the victim, such as to forgive always and immediately. Matthew's process of reconciliation includes time for the victims to step up, when they are ready, to present their case before the whole church. The less safe a space feels, the more time a victim will need. Victims must grow into their ability to speak. They need people who will 'hear them to speech',⁴⁸ that is, who will create spaces where the victims' small voices can be heard. One could say that forgiveness starts with speaking up against hurt, and is completed by

⁴⁶ A great deal of research has been conducted concerning gaslighting so that we now speak of a 'sociology of gaslighting'. See Paige L. Sweet, 'The Sociology of Gaslighting', *American Sociological Review*, 84.5 (2019), pp. 851–875, doi: 10.1177/0003122419874843; also, *Manipulation: Theory and Practice*, ed. by Christian Coons and Michael Weber (OUP, 2014), who comment, 'manipulation is at the heart of some of our deepest social problems' (p. 2).

⁴⁷ This is a much-discussed topic in psychology. To deny victims to see, feel, and express their hurt, to call them oversensitive, to tell them that the bully's intentions were not to hurt them and hence they have no right feel victimised, have been classified as 'gaslighting'. Gaslighting rewrites the victim's history. It makes them doubt their senses, renders them insecure and quiet and easy to rule over, all of which, Sweet states, means it is primarily a 'sociological [...] phenomenon' (Sweet 'The Sociology of Gaslighting', p. 852).

⁴⁸ The term 'hearing someone to speech' was coined by Nelle Morton in *The Journey is Home* (Beacon Press, 1985). See also Rachel Muers, *Keeping God's Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication* (Blackwell, 2004). The ability to speak and to be heard is an expression of power (p. 50). Expressions like 'being a voice for someone' or even 'amplifying someone's voice' already testify to a silenced and patronised person who has been denied a platform to express their own pain.

getting validation from the community, regardless of the perpetrators' willingness to confess. The perpetrator is left to the church.

Equally, regardless of always siding with the victim, Matthew's rule is not a shaming scheme aimed at ousting the bully. When Matthew's insertions are kept together, we see that the process of reconciliation entails forgiveness, and vice versa. Perfect forgiveness (Matt 18:21–25) removes shaming and ousting, while affirming and acknowledging the full spectrum of the victim's pain. The goal is never to 'untie' people, but to tie them in, so that the Christ-culture of the community is furthered and everyone can grow 'into Christ'.⁴⁹

Perfect, 70 times 7 forgiveness has strings attached. Luke's simplified version of Matthew's insertions (Luke 17:3–4) says just that the bully will be forgiven if or when they repent. Forgiveness without repentance has no value for the perpetrator, as the perpetrator will continue in their evil until it is too late for them. When the church gives victims a platform to challenge the perpetrator, it sets in motion a process of community growth towards 'not scandalising a little one' and also 'winning a brother or a sister'. Matthew 18:22 is therefore not about the victims' obligation to 'forgive and forget' or to share in the perpetrator's guilt. It is about 'little ones' who need affirmation and bullies who need to be brought to repentance and then reinstated into the Christian community so that the church can become a place of peace, a taste of heaven in a dying world.

⁴⁹ Wilder, *The Pandora Problem*, chapters 1–2.