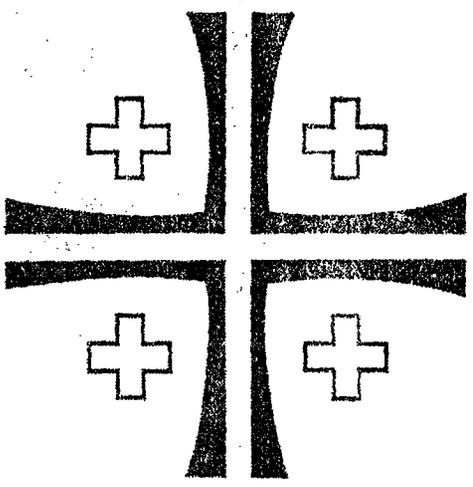


Matthew 18:17 and Excommunication

"Meditate
upon these things;
give thyself
wholly to them;
that thy profiting
may appear unto all"

I Timothy 4:15



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A fruit of the conflicts within the Synodical Conference during the past decade, insofar as these affected the present membership of the CLC and continue to engage our interest, may be observed in a renewed inquiry among us in regard to the meaning and application of our Savior's words as recorded in Matthew 18:15-17. This, we dare say, is not the least of the beneficial by-products of our sad and painful experiences. The agitations and dislocations caused by the hard need of contending for the faith are many; but in the fact that Christians thus aroused to the need of proving the spirits and reproving the gainsayers are driven back to the Scriptures for reassurance through earnest research we find a blessing accruing to the obedient and faithful.

The Wisconsin Synod specifically went on record in support of the assertion that Romans 16:17 requires the avoidance of a church body which is causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine only when and after "we have reached the conviction that admonition is of no further avail and that the erring church body demands recognition for their error." (cf. Proceedings 1959, P.211, Resolution I). In the thinking that fathered this astounding disregard for the ipsissima verba of the text, the overtones of Matthew 18:15-17 are discernible. Some proponents and defenders of that doctrinal formula would perhaps protest that they are not conscious of interpreting Romans 16:17 in the light of Matthew 18:15-17. We are bound nevertheless to point out that any effort to determine a proper state of relations with an erring church body by the strength of expectations regarding the effectiveness of admonition rather than by the actual conduct of that church body superimposes upon Romans 16:17 the concepts that pertain to the prescribed dealing with an impenitent sinner.

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This confusion of genera has, in fact, frequently revealed itself in extemporaneous debate on the floor

of Wisconsin Synod conventions in the past, as well as in private or semi-private exchanges in corridors and stairways and dining-halls. Repeatedly the point has been urged that we certainly do not terminate fellowship with a presumed brother until we are sure that we have done all we can to turn him from his false way. This was maintained in defense of a failure to sever relations with a church body that had already been publicly denounced as a causer of divisions and offenses. Thus it became, and is, manifest, all protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, that with the question of the termination of church fellowship the principles that govern the approved ministry to a soul held in the thrall of impenitence are mingled and applied in re, despite the fact that impenitence is not mentioned as a factor in Romans 16:17 and would indeed be impossible to establish in the case of an entire church body.

Since many, if not all, among us have in one way or another been affected by, or participated in, the non sequiturs of the false position outlined above, we can only welcome the diligence that has evoked among us a renewed and penetrating examination of the Lord's Will as expressed in Matthew 18. The stimulating essay read by Pastor L. Schierenbeck to the delegates at the recessed convention of the CLC at Sleepy Eye, Minnesota, in January, as well as the animated discussion that ensued, bear eloquent witness to a determination to see clearly and act scripturally in all situations involving the duties and privileges of brotherhood.

Due to the press of business the reading of the essay could not be completed at the convention. Therefore also the floor discussion remained inconclusive, in some respects fragmentary. It is not the purpose of the following brief comment to preempt the assignment of the convention essayist by undertaking an exhaustive study of the passage under consideration at Sleepy Eye and scheduled for further treatment at the summer convention of 1961. This rather lengthy introduction, designed to fix the historical perspective by

which our interest has been heightened, will be found disproportionate to the present paper's scope. It is desired herewith only to enlarge somewhat upon issues emphasized by the floor discussion and to crystallize some of the thinking involved. Specifically, the reader's thoughts are to be focused upon this inquiry:

Whether, and in what sense, Matthew 18:17 includes a divine directive for the action known as excommunication.

.....

The directive given by our Lord to His disciples as recorded in Matthew 18:15-17 sounds a deeply personal note. In our traditional, familiar preoccupation with the passage as a formula for admonition that may eventuate in the excommunication of a sinner this significant fact must not be underestimated or minimized.

The case envisioned by the Lord is that of a member of the fellowship who has committed a grievous sin and continues therein. The instruction for dealing with such an offender is spoken to the second person singular, which in grammatical terms occurs thirteen times in the three verses: in seven instances the personal pronoun is used, and in six the same individual is addressed through the verbs. "Thy brother against thee, go (thou), tell (thou) between thee and him alone If he hear thee, (thou) hast gained thy brother take (thou) with thee if he shall neglect to hear them, tell (thou) it to the Church do (thou) let him be unto thee"

This intense concentration upon the duty of the individual becomes the more significant and important to the understanding of the passage when we bear in mind that, although the so-called "three steps" of admonition cannot be carried through with propriety or hope of success unless the sin involved is a public one and subject to demonstration,* and while

*"In the biblical passage (Mt. 18) you hear that we must deal with certain public sins, committed by persons who are known and with cases where one brother sees another commit sin." (Luther, The Keys, 1530) (Luther's Works, Vol. 40, p. 370) - 19 -

in effect every sin of a brother is a sin against the entire body, the Lord places no emphasis upon these considerations in his expressions. He disregards the wider aspects of the situation because His immediate purpose is that of placing before the individual disciple the serious obligations of his spiritual priesthood, as the convention essayist so eloquently explained.

The context (18:6ff) deals with the grievous perils of offense and the urgent need of personal intervention in the problem occasioned by sin-endangered souls. The touching parable of the sheep that has strayed from a flock of one hundred and commands the full attention of the shepherd introduces the affirmation that the individual, young or old, is the object of the utmost concern of the Heavenly Father. By way of ultimate emphasis our Savior adduces Himself as the foremost exponent of such concern, defining the rescue of lost souls as His mission in the world (18:11); and by implication He lays the joyous burden of assisting in this assignment upon the shoulders of each disciple. This indicates that we are to regard personal seeking of the lost as the didactic content of our passage. All else is peripheral.

The primary reference in v.17, then, is not to the activity of the Church, but to that of the individual upon whose person the question of proper procedure here reverts. When it is apparent that the offender will not hear the Church, what are YOU to do at that point in YOUR effort to save the soul of the recalcitrant? Christ advocates a final expedient, a last measure of love: Nothing is left but to "let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican." The Lord does not here touch directly upon any further divine authorization for placing the sinner into that category. Whether the individual is so to regard the impenitent one because the congregation has found it necessary to excommunicate the offender is a question that need not be answered at this point. Enough that the Lord says: "Let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican." Let him no longer be accounted a brother, but as one who is without.

Inquiry has been raised, however, regarding the import of the word "as" in this statement. The Savior says: "Let him be unto thee AS (*LIBTEC*) a heathen man" Could this adverb make of the Lord's directive a mere counsel for conduct? In other words, can it serve to indicate that no actual judgment upon the spiritual state or destiny of the offender is involved, but that he is merely to be treated "as though he were" a heathen man? A resolution of this question is imperative; for it raises a critical issue. The nature of this final procedure against the obdurate sinner must be determined and understood. Since it is to be the last measure possible in the campaign to deliver him from the bondage of his impenitence, the effort dare not be fumbled as a result of failure in appreciating its divinely intended quality.

The answer lies clearly established in the form of the word "as." It is, as has been pointed out, an adverb. The force of the word, then, is adverbial and not adjectival. It modifies the verb, not the nouns. It defines the manner of treatment, not the quality of the object. Jesus did not say: Let him be unto thee as though he were a heathen ..., but: His being to thee shall be that of a heathen man ... Your relation to him shall be after the manner of treatment accorded a heathen. This in no way suggests that he might actually be something else, namely a Christian still; on the contrary, the Lord's statement peremptorily forbids any relationship with him other than that which is due a heathen.

That such conduct constitutes pronouncement of an actual judgment upon the offender must be obvious. Pretense and sparring before a mirror have no place in soul-saving. To adjudge a man a heathen through action without having a factual foundation for such a verdict would be an ignoble and slanderous thing. All that we know from Scripture of the fellowship enjoined upon us with those whom we must recognize as Christian brethren makes it mandatory that we treat no one as a heathen man without thereby affirming it as a true and sure expression of his actual status. And the rightness of our verdict does not rest upon whether we have sized up the situation correctly, but upon

proper action taken in full accord with the Lord's instructions. "If he will not hear the Church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican" -- because he IS that!

We have seen, then, that Matthew 18:15-17 is indeed, from first to last, a prescription for personal ventures in soul-saving. Verse 17 indicates the part which the congregation plays in such an undertaking. But the first consequence of congregational participation, which is envisioned as a form of assistance to the individual who undertook to call the sinner to repentance, is stated in this way: "Let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican."

Our original question, meanwhile, has not been answered. Does Matthew 18:17, then, include a directive for the action known as excommunication? The fact has been established that, after refusal to hear the Church, the sinner is to be labeled a heathen and treated accordingly. That this treatment is enjoined upon the individual who originated the process of admonition, rather than upon the congregation, is readily explained by the entire context. The discourse of Jesus has never been diverted from its object, the second person singular, and properly finishes the development of thought where it naturally leads. Thou hast undertaken something, and this is the way thou shalt end it under given circumstances.

Although it calls for the application of the same moral pressure and spiritual force attributed by Scripture to excommunication, the action to which the individual is directed in v.17 is not per se to be defined as an act of excommunication. This word, which is an ecclesiastical terminus technicus devised to respond to the scriptural procedure which it defines, is employed by the Church in our times only when we seek to describe the exclusion of an impenitent sinner from the Christian congregation as illustrated by the instance recorded in I Cor. 5. From this example it will appear that the Apostle calls upon the Church, and not upon any individual within a church, to execute this formal function of the Keys. It would be

unscriptural to assert that in Matthew 18:17 the admonishing Christian is instructed, without further reference to the congregation, to "deliver such an one unto Satan." (I Cor. 5:5). Individual Christians cannot "excommunicate" upon their own responsibility. Even the pastor serves only as the voice of the congregation in making the official pronouncement.

At the same time we will recognize and record the fact that the congregation's judgment must coincide with that enjoined upon the individual who brought the case before the Church. The congregation's experience as described by Jesus confirms the original findings of the individual soul-seeker and of the witnesses which at one point in the process were called in. By bringing the case before the congregation in conjunction with these witnesses, the guilty person is declared to be guilty, not merely of the sin charged, but of impenitence as well. For had he heard the witnesses, there would have been no need of resorting to further efforts at admonition. The failure of the sinner at the last to hear the Church compels the instigator of the entire process to regard him as a heathen man; but by the same token it places the congregation before the requirement of pronouncing excommunication. For "quicquid omnes tangit, maxime in re salutari, ob omnibus debet curari." (Whatever concerns all, especially in a matter involving salvation, must be treated by all.) (Walther, Past. Theol., p. 323.) Here the words of Prof. J. Schaller, written almost fifty years ago, will prove helpful.

".....Motivated by their new, spiritual nature, the Christian and the Christian congregation desire only to bring all men to God and the Savior; and toward this end their every effort is also directed in dealing with each fallen brother.

"In a Christian congregation filled with the spirit of the Gospel this motive will then characterize its activity in the so-called third step of fraternal admonition. Upon the brother who is brought before the congregation there now rests, indeed, a far graver charge than that which was brought

to his attention by the first Christian who dealt with him. For not only is it an established fact that he has committed the sin which threatens to destroy him, but his very presence before the congregation indicates that thus far he has refused to accept the divine Word by which the one and the several had ministered to him in the interest of his salvation. Essentially his condition cannot become more serious than it now is. Already the Word applies to him which says: "Whoso despiseth the word shall be destroyed." (Prov.13:13). For the time being, however, the congregation does not come to grips with this fact, considering it merely as the circumstance which has provided the congregation with the occasion for dealing with the person.

"Thus the congregation does not proceed with the presupposition that the charge which has been levelled is justified, but carefully establishes to its own satisfaction that a case of manifest sin actually exists and that the accused has been dealt with in a truly evangelical manner. But by such investigation the fact is confirmed that the congregation has proper jurisdiction in the matter. It renders a judgment upon the preliminary activities that took place in the case, and not as yet upon the sinner, the approach to whom is one of earnest effort to win him, that is, to bring him to a knowledge of his sin and a penitent return to the Savior, that he might be delivered from the peril of eternal damnation.

"But if the admonition of the congregation does not effect the result desired by the congregation and by the Savior - what then? Human zeal will reply: Then nought remains except excommunication; then the sinner must be excluded, severed from the body of Christ as a dead member, etc. And this zeal can easily assume a legalistic form. It is noteworthy that the Savior does not give expression to the thoughts indicated above. He says nothing about what the congregation is to do with such a sinner, but addresses the person upon whom it became incumbent in the first instance to deal with the offending brother in his sorry affair. To that one Jesus says: Let

him be unto thee exactly as a heathen man and publican. In the language of the people from whom the Savior was descended after the flesh: You must look upon him as one who has ceased to be your brother, as one who has forfeited his place in the kingdom of heaven. It is then, of course, self-evident that the entire congregation, which after all had made the cause of the original exhorter its own - that thus every single Christian in the congregation must adopt the same position toward the former brother. To the congregation the latter can thereafter be nothing other than a heathen and publican. This judgment is pronounced by every Christian in the assembly for his own person; he arrives at a personal decision in the case." (Quartalschrift, 1916, 91f.)

The ultimate outcome of the admonition, then, is determined by the refusal to hear the Church. The attitude of the individual toward the offender is henceforth governed by this refusal. But what was it that the offender refused to hear? What did the Church say? Nothing less, surely, than a preaching of Law and Gospel: the stern application of the Law was made to the Old Adam and the appeal of the Gospel groped for the hand of the faith still being sought in the man. We ask: Could the congregation's testimony be said to be complete until it has proceeded, assuming the necessity, to the final awe-ful verdict that binds the sin? Indeed, this phase of the admonition, for which the Church alone is qualified, is indispensable when other efforts have failed. And when the offender does not quail even before that terrible word, when he stands unmoved by this overwhelming judgment of the Church, he is to be treated by the individual and, of course, by all saints, as a heathen man.

While therefore the text does not expressly include the ecclesiastical terminology of excommunication because it was, as we have shown, given primarily to instruct the individual in his personal efforts, the activity described in verse 17 and the abruptly succeeding words of verse 18 broadly intimate that a true administration of the Keys in this proceeding would leave the congregation with no alternative

other than to bind the sin and its guilt upon the impenitent, and that this explains and validates the conduct required of the individual in verse 17b.

E.S.