



This document serves as a position statement on Matthew 18 and its relationship to gossip. It was written and approved by Elders Jordan Hall and Shawn Rost, with special counsel from Elder Candidate, Paul Richter. This document will be posted on the church's website and referred to as necessary

Matthew 18 and Gossip

Part 1: The Church's Due Process

If a brother sins...

[15] "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. [16] But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. [17] If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. [18] Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. [19] Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. [20] For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." (Matthew 18:15-20 ESV)

If one wants to admit charges against an elder...

[19] Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. [20] As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. [21] In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. (1 Timothy 5:19-21 ESV)

Punish by the majority decision...

[5] Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. [6] For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough,

[7] so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. [8] So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. (2 Corinthians 2:5-8 ESV)

Restoration...

[1] Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. (Galatians 6:1 ESV)

FAQs

1. **What kind of complaint should be brought?** The complaint should regard *sin* in particular. The word in Matthew 18:15 is, “If your brother ἀμαρτήση against you.” This word means “sin” as is translated in NIV, NLT, ESV, HCSV, and Young’s Literal. It is translated “trespass” in the KJV.
2. **What if the complaint does not involve sin, but opinion?** Certainly it would seem reasonable that one Christian share concerns with another regarding issues that are not sin issues. However, it would appear that Matthew 18 is dealing in particular with violations of the Moral Law.
3. **What if the complaint involves perceived sin towards someone else, other than the one bringing the complaint?** The Scripture would seem to give caution, unless the individual cannot speak for themselves or is an orphan or widow or someone unable to speak and calls picking up another’s dispute “foolish” (Proverbs 26:17). Matthew 18 is specifically for sins against the plaintiff. Sins against others do not seem to be prohibited as being brought up per se, but conflicts between two people should not be brought up if they are already reconciled and forgiven.
4. **What is the first step of conflict resolution or discipline assuming the criteria (above) are first met?** The individual who believes he has been sinned against is to go to the perceived offender personally and privately, according to Matthew 18:15.
5. **What is the second step of conflict resolution or discipline?** The second step is taken if the plaintiff is not “listened” to. This is the word ἀκούση and means, “listened” or “heard out” and as Matthew Henry points out in his commentary, is done with the goal of reconciliation. It does not imply total agreement, but rather it implies a sympathetic hearing of one’s concerns and an earnest pursuit to determine if there is truth within it and if so, to respond with repentance. This second step includes taking one or two along with you (implying that you’re going back to the perceived offender) so that your charges may be established. They are not witnesses of the offense, per se, but witnesses that the plaintiff’s grave concerns and the perceived offender didn’t respond with a sympathetic ear or that they unjustly discounted the plaintiff’s concerns without investigation.* They then become witnesses of the perceived offender’s impenitence, assuming if they agree with what

they've heard from the plaintiff during their time together with the perceived offender.

6. **What is the third step of conflict resolution or discipline?** The third step, according to verse 17 is to take that matter to the church if the one or two witnesses agrees with the original plaintiff that the perceived offender hasn't listened or is continuing in unrepentance. A difference of opinion can be had as to whether it's the whole body or a representation of that body (perhaps a council or committee). If the majority feel that the individual is not listening to them and did not listen to the two or three and original plaintiff, then they are to treat the offender (now no longer *perceived*, but ruled by the congregation to be one in reality) as though they're not a part of God's community.
7. **Regardless of whether the process goes to steps 1, 2 or 3, how should others within the church respond?** If the offender is repentant and listening, they should be affirmed in love and comforted (2 Corinthians 2:5-8) and then restored gently (Galatians 6:1). If they are not repentant or listening, they are to be continued to be treated as though they are not a part of the Body.
8. **What role do the 1 or 2 witnesses play in particular?** First, they are to help the entire process be done Biblically. They are to insure that the plaintiff is being biblical in how he follows the process. Secondly, they are to act as witnesses to determine the validity of the plaintiff's complaints while being "brought along" to the perceived offender. Third, they are to determine whether or not the perceived offender has reacted Biblically to the plaintiff's complaints and if repentance is necessary, has repented. Fourth, they are testify to the church that the perceived offender has not repented of what they judge to be sin or if the perceived offender did not listen to the complaints in general. If they have to testify to the church of this, they are to take up the cause as if it were their own, and accuse the elder before the Body. Finally, if the plaintiff's concerns are petty or misconstrued or if they detect deceit, they should lovingly admonish the plaintiff. If necessary, they are to defend the perceived offender from slander if they believe the issue should be dropped but the plaintiff continues.
9. **Do the 1 or 2 witnesses need to be in agreement?** It would seem so, yes. There needs to be unanimous consensus. In that the plaintiff could have picked the 1 or 2, if there is not unanimous consensus it's a clear sign that the complaint should be dropped and forgiven.
10. **Can the plaintiff find different witnesses if the first are not in agreement?** No, that would undermine the entire process.
11. ***Is the process different for elders?** Yes, slightly. First, it would appear from 1 Timothy 5:19 that the burden of proof is slightly higher to accuse elders of wrong doing. Ellicott's commentary says, "*Charges—owing, possibly, to jealousy, party feeling, suspected doctrinal error—will not unfrequently be brought against a*

presbyter. Such an accusation is only to be received by Timothy when the evidence is perfectly clear. Every possible precaution against simply vexatious charges brought against one occupying the hard and difficult position of a presbyter, must be taken by the presiding minister.” As Barnes’ Notes points out, this is because elders will frequently have accusations brought against them for many reasons, not the least of which is because they have to rebuke people of sin, and they are spiteful in return, *“there might be reason to apprehend that evil-minded persons might be disposed to bring charges against the ministers of the gospel or other officers of the church, and it was important, therefore, that their rights should be guarded with anxious care. The ministers of religion often give offence to wicked people by their rebukes of sin (compare Mark 6:17-20); wicked people would rejoice to see an accusation against them sustained; the cause of religion would be liable to suffer much when its ministers were condemned as guilty of gross offences, and it is right, therefore, that the evidence in the case should be as free as possible from all suspicion that it is caused by malignity, by hatred of religion, or by conspiracy...”* To be fair, Paul is telling Timothy – a pastor – not to accept charges against other ministers unless there’s two or three backing up the plaintiff’s claims. The higher burden of proof for elders seems partially responsible for the higher punishment – public rebuke upon majority vote instead of when a more private admonition might suffice for regular members (1 Timothy 5:20). Please note, the public rebuke comes after the church’s due process and step 3, not whenever someone would like to rebuke him. Finally, keep in mind that this doesn’t seem terribly different from what is required as a burden of proof for regular churchmen. Regular churchmen require “1 or 2 witnesses,” and elders require “2 or 3” for another elder to consider the charge against a fellow elder. This is different than the regular churchman, where only one individual needed to make the accusation and have it heard by a fellow elder.

12. What does “admit a charge” against an elder mean? According to Jamiseon-Faussiet Commentary, *“Doubtless [Timothy] would not condemn any save on the testimony of two or three witnesses, but in ordinary cases he would cite them, as the law of Moses also allowed, though there were only one witness. But in the case of elders, he would require two or three witnesses before even citing them; for their character for innocence stands higher, and they are exposed to envy and calumny more than others.”* *“Receive” does not, as Alford thinks, include both citation and conviction, but means only the former.* In other words, it doesn’t mean “convict an elder only after two or three witnesses,” but “do not listen to the charge or repeat it” without two or three witnesses. Again, this is because elders so often receive complaints and charges of wrong-doing because their job creates many natural adversaries.

13. In what ways can sin be committed in this process?

- a. The plaintiff doesn't go to the perceived offender personally and privately before accusing of sin, thereby being guilty of gossip and possibly slander.
 - b. The plaintiff desires a disciplinary process due to problems or grievances that are not issues relating to sin but matters relating to mere opinion, thereby grieving both the perceived offender and others who have to be involved.
 - c. The offender does not listen to the plaintiff and hear him out.
 - d. The offender recognizes the plaintiff has valid criticisms of sin, but he doesn't repent.
 - e. The plaintiff *or* the perceived offender ignores or spurns the outcome of the process. For example, if the one or two witnesses (step 2) or church body (step 3) do not find the plaintiff's complaints valid, and the plaintiff discounts the majority opinion and continues to bear grudges in disfellowship. Or, if the perceived offender does not consider the opinion of the one or two witnesses or church body valid because they rule against him, and he discounts the majority opinion and continues to bear grudges against the plaintiff or behave unrepentantly.
 - f. The 1 or 2 witnesses don't perform their function of insuring a godly reconciliation process.
 - g. The 1 or 2 witnesses don't judge impartially.
 - h. The 1 or 2 witnesses refuse to get involved in the process.
 - i. The congregation discounts sin or doesn't deal with the issue brought to them by the plaintiff, if he is accompanied by one or two witnesses in agreement.
 - j. The congregation listens to the complaint of the plaintiff if he doesn't have one or two witnesses in agreement.
 - k. The 1 or 2 witnesses listen to the complaint of the plaintiff if he hasn't already gone to the perceived offender personally and privately first.
 - l. If either side gossips about the situation prior to the fulfillment of due process.
 - m. If either side refuses to accept the outcome of the due process (you can't say, "I want the other party to listen to the church, but if they find I'm wrong, then I'm not going to listen to the church).
 - n. If the plaintiff desires vengeance rather than restoration.
 - o. If the perceived offender desires vengeance rather than reconciliation.
14. **What if either side doesn't like the outcome of the due process?** As stated in 13e above, both parties are required to accept the process and be reconciled toward the other side. Should the process find the perceived offender guilty, if he repents, he is to be restored graciously and reaffirmed in love. The plaintiff should then rejoice. If the process finds the plaintiff's concerns dwindling, petty or wrong, then the

perceived offender should embrace him in love and be reconciled even in spite of what occurred. Likewise, the plaintiff should humbly submit to the process and have faith that where two or three are gathered in this process, Christ has guided it. They should then embrace who they once accused and give them a charitable and Christian benefit of the doubt.

15. **What should the church do after the process?** The church shouldn't know about the process unless the third step has arrived. Once the church has made the judgment, it is to consider the matter closed unless repentance is necessary and if so, closed upon asking forgiveness and professing penitence.

Part 2: The Abolition of Gossip

He who goes about as a slanderer reveals secrets, Therefore do not associate with a gossip. – Proverbs 20:19

There are six things which the LORD hates, Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, And hands that shed innocent blood, A heart that devises wicked plans, Feet that run rapidly to evil, A false witness who utters lies, And one who spreads strife among brothers. – Proverbs 6:16-19

If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. – James 1:26

Besides that, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not. – 1 Timothy 5:12-13

Gossip is sin

The Scripture is abundantly clear. Gossip is sin. But what is gossip? Gossip in the Old Testament is the word רִבְיָה and means, “whispering, defamation, evil report.” It is similar, although not identical, to the concept of slander. Slander is factually untrue. Gossip *may* be true. So what is gossip? Gossip, according to the English dictionary is, “casual or unconstrained conversation or reports about other people, typically involving details that are not confirmed as being true.”

A practical definition of Gossip from a Biblical perspective is “conversations or reports about others that are speculative or one-sided, revealing private issues that are not the business of either the speaker or gossip or the hearer.”

In other words, gossip is speaking on currently private matters that are yet not publicly disclosed, when they don't pertain to speaker *or* the listener.

When is gossip *gossip*? Examples:

1. One person was sinned against or caught another in sin. Instead of following the Biblical due process for how to deal with accusations of sin, the individual shares it with someone else, including details of both the sin and the alleged sinner. **This is gossip even if done in the name seeking counsel or asking for prayer**, when done to reveal both the nature of the sin and/or the alleged sinner.
 - a. **Why?** It was sin because they are to follow Matthew 18 and speak to the perceived offender personally and in private. Perhaps their facts are wrong. Perhaps there's miscommunication. Or perhaps they were right, and need to give the individual a chance to repent before needlessly hurting theirs and the church's reputation and causing collateral damage among more people.
 - b. The only counsel that can be offered is "follow Matthew 18." Christians should already know that protocol, and follow it without informing others, gossiping in the first place.
 - c. **How to avoid it?** If you are hearing a complaint from someone, you should ask them if they have contacted the perceived offender and met personally and privately. If they answer is no, tell them it is gossip and refuse to continue. If they say that have met with them personally and privately, ask if you are their first or second witness to the second step of Matthew 18. If they say no, tell them it is gossip and refuse to continue. If they say that they have no intention of following through with Matthew 18, remember this simple rule; if it's not severe enough to follow Biblical due process, it is not severe enough to take offense to.
2. Someone isn't satisfied with the way that Biblical due process was done. Perhaps the outcome was not to their liking. Perhaps they feel it isn't being done speedily enough. Perhaps they've already been overcome by the sin of gossip and have made a preconceived, prejudged conclusion that things went poorly regarding that process. So, they set about to "warn people" of the problems that so-and-so are having or the way they were offended by someone else. They view their sin as loving, because they're trying to warn people of perceived problems or shortcomings in others.
 - a. **Why?** While it's a legitimate concern that Matthew 18 wasn't followed (which may or may not be true), the solution is to approach individuals involved and inquire of leadership or if necessary both sides (particularly if they're gossiping to you) and ask that Matthew 18 be followed correctly. It is not, however, license to take into your own hands (or tongue) to accomplish what you feel the Biblical system of due process failed to do.
 - b. **How to avoid it?** The solution is simple: Ask for verification that both sides sit privately together and follow through on stage 1 of Matthew 18 and then the second step if necessary. If you are convinced that one side is resisting stage 1 of Matthew 18, perhaps you should be one of your friend's "1 or 2" witnesses and ask to meet with that individual. If they refuse to meet with you, take the matter to the church. It is not, ever and never, license to gossip freely. The congregation can be so "warned" when the third stage of Matthew 18 commences.

3. Someone wants to find out more about a controversy so they begin calling “the source” and investigating the manner on their own. But unless they are the plaintiff or the perceived offender, or unless they are the one or two witnesses involved, it remains gossip.

Cautions about gossip reciprocity

1. Sometimes, as gossip festers and grows, the one who has accusations made toward him (or perhaps others who are defensive of him) will be tempted to “tell the real story” and explain the situation. However, to do so, even in self-defense, is gossip and is sinful. To hold silence in the face of accusation against someone, when they’re trying to avoid gossip, is exceedingly sinful and is to not judge fairly. It is absolutely *not* the responsibility of anyone to defend themselves from gossip, even and especially when Matthew 18 was not followed regarding the controversy. To demand an explanation from them (when it would require gossiping) is demanding they sin.
2. Sometimes, charges that “people are hiding things” from the church or fellow believers because they’re not gossiping regarding the situation, telling people what they want to know. Unless you are the offended party or their 1 or 2 witnesses, however, the facts regarding controversies are none of your business. You are not *entitled* to gossip, even if you want to hear someone’s “side of the story” just to settle your mind. You should not be entertaining gossip in the first place. Your primary concern should be praying that Matthew 18 be followed. It is not the church’s job to air everyone’s grievance so everyone is “in the know,” particularly when those grievances haven’t gone through step 1 and step 2 of Matthew 18 to substantiate them. By the way, anyone should feel free to ask if Matthew 18 is being followed Biblically (assuming you’ve already heard the gossip, which is unfortunate), but that is the extent of what should be shared regarding a matter that is biblically still between two people and perhaps their witnesses.
3. If there is not a culture of “no need to defend yourself” against accusations that have not gone through Matthew 18, there will be a temptation by all parties to gossip in self-defense. Again, gossiping in self-defense is still gossip. We should not expect it and we surely shouldn’t ask others to do it.
4. Gossip that is done when Matthew 18 is not being followed is almost exclusively and entirely done for the sake of building consensus. This is precisely what the Scripture speaks of, which is to sow discord among the brethren, which God hates.
5. Gossip is incredibly easy to fall into, and almost all are guilty (and that is not an excuse, neither does it downplay its seriousness). Gossip usually only happens when there is not fear of rebuke from the one to whom you gossip. There needs to be a reasonable amount of fear regarding the plausible scenario that you will be rebuked for it by the hearers. This is necessary to keep our tongues from being rudders of a ship that run us aground.