



The Application of Ecclesiology in Matthew: from the perspective of paradigm shift in Matthew 16: 13-20 and 18: 15-18

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Abstract: In the four Gospels, only Matthew mentions churches. He connects it with Peter, authorities, and church discipline. It is also only Matthew that records the single speech about the church in Jesus' lifetime, which started a paradigm shift from the ἐκκλησία in the OT to the church in the NT. Meanwhile, the church became the formal embassy of God's kingdom after the Messiah ascended to heaven. The church community rule represents the authority of the church. Understanding the church's character in Matthew will help us catch a glimpse of the church's origin in the first century. Matthew emphasizes the authority of the church rather than the pastoral or any other functions of the church — this emphasis on authority also connects with the whole motif of Matthew. According to the paradigm-shifting role of Peter and the community discourse in Matthew, the "binding and loosing" authority of the church is church discipline. The center of church discipline is about forgiveness and reconciliation, and the discipline is not only applicable for individuals but also the church as the whole — the entire leadership.

Keywords: Matthew, church, God's kingdom

We have to introduce the concept of the paradigm shift. Ferdinand Deist defines a paradigm as "the complex of convictions, values, and world view shared by a scientific community which provides its philosophical framework for valid



academic inquiry."¹ Thomas Kuhn's definition shows, "A paradigm shift is a fundamental change in the basic concepts and experimental practices of a scientific discipline."² Thomas Kuhn identified this concept first, but his concept has also been used in "non-scientific contexts to describe a profound change in a fundamental model or perception of events, such as a radical change in personal beliefs, a rethinking of complex systems or organizations, or a replacement of a former way of thinking or organizing with a radically different way of thinking or organizing."³ This concept is also suitable for critical historical events in the Bible, such as the confession of Peter and the new community of God's people.

Peter as an Ecclesiological Paradigm Shift

Peter was an essential figure in the confession in Matthew 16. After Peter answered: "you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," (Matt 16:16 NIV) Jesus responded to him: "I tell that you are Peter (πέτρος) and on this rock (πέτρα) I will build my church (ἐκκλησία)." Many believed this rock was Peter, which means he was the first rock of the church. Peter is even considered the first Bishop according to the apostolic succession in Catholic and Orthodox traditions. However, we should reconsider the relationship among Peter, the rock and the church.

Actually, "the Peter of Matt. 16:16-17 has had a long and illustrious career in the history of biblical interpretation. He confronted the Ebionites and the

¹ Von Ferdinand E. Deist. *Prophet und Prophetenbuch: Festschrift für Otto Kaiser zum 65. Geburtstag: The prophets: are we heading for a paradigm switch?* (Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 185.

² Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. (University of Chicago Press, 1962), 54.

³ Wikipedia, "paradigm shift", 6 May 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradigm_shift.



Docetists, tutored 'spiritual' readers of scriptures, rebuked the Arians, attended the councils of Nicea and Chalcedon, censured Pelagius, bolstered the papacy, critiqued the papacy, spoke from the pulpit, and sat in the pew."¹ However, this study will describe Peter, the spokesman of the disciples, as only the symbolization of an ecclesiological paradigm shift from the OT to the NT.

First of all, we need to understand the background of this conversation. Jewish people were no longer worshiping physical idols in the first century. They had learned their lessons from their fathers throughout the OT. They refused to bow down to any physical idols, such as Baal, Asherah, golden cows, or any other Roman deities. That is why the Romans and Jews had to crucify Jesus — they believed Jesus claiming to be the Son of God was blasphemy, another version of idolatry. Actually, Jesus never accused them of idolatry because they no longer worshiped physical idols. However, Caesarea Philippi was an exception. In 14, "Philip II named it Caesarea in honor of Roman Emperor Augustus and made improvements to the city."² Then he put his name (Philippi) after the Emperor's to commemorate the founding of the city. Caesarea Philippi was very close to Mount Hermon, where we believe the transfiguration took place. Nevertheless, most importantly, Caesarea Philippi was a city full of physical idols and Gentile deities.

Jesus stood in front of all these idols and asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" This is a paradigm shift question. They said: "Some say John the Baptizer, some, Elijah, and others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." Obviously, these disciples were still operating under the old paradigm. The shift happened with Jesus' second question, "But who do you say that I am?" This is an

¹ Tucker S. Ferda, *The Seventy Faces of Peter's Confession: Matt. 16:16-17 in the History of Interpretation*, *Biblical Interpretation*, 20 (2012), 456.

² Wilson, John Francis, *Caesarea Philippi :Baniyas, the Lost City of Pan*, (I.B.Tauris, 2004), 20-22.



important turning point in the history of redemption because the new paradigm was about to come. Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." We have already mentioned above that Jewish people no longer worshipped physical idols, and the second of the Ten Commandments also made clear that God's people shall not make idols. The *Shema* was confessed by Jewish people for generations, that Yahweh is one (Deut 6:4). They would never accept that God could be in the physical form of a human being, which was the reason they denied the possibility of the incarnation. The Jewish public was still holding on to the old paradigm in the OT context. However, when God himself became a physical reality, Peter among the disciples recognized this paradigm shift from the law in the OT to the renewed power of God in the NT. Of course, Peter was the representative of the twelve, and Matthew also highlights Peter's misunderstanding of the Son of God title later in 16:22. Peter was not necessarily better than them. However, Matthew here indicates the vital paradigm shift event that Peter was going through as a representative.

Another similar event happened in Acts 10, where Peter again came across a new paradigm shift. God forced Peter to kill and eat the unclean things three times, but Peter kept refusing according to the law in the OT, which was also the revelation of God himself. Peter did not do anything wrong, and he obeyed the word of God. But God said: "What God has cleansed, you must not call unclean." God was showing Peter that a new paradigm was about to come by his power. Peter was right to recognize the unclean, but he failed to see that only God can cleanse the unclean and the renewing power from God to make the unclean clean. It is a crucial ecclesiological paradigm shift that Gentiles (such as Cornelius) can be accepted into the church covenant community.

Secondly, Jesus gave a new name to him, Peter (πέτρος), and pronounced that on this rock (πέτρα) he will build his church. Some scholars believe that "by Jesus' day the Greek terms πέτρος and πέτρα were interchangeable and that the original



Aramaic form of Peter's name that Jesus used means simply rock."¹ Whether or not there is a difference between πέτρος (isolated stone) and πέτρα (living stone), Jesus never called him Peter after giving this new name, except when Peter denied the Lord three times (Luke 22:34). What is the point of giving him a new name and never using it, except once in a dishonorable situation? Jesus called him Peter both in the context of his confessing and denying of the Lord across all the Gospels.

Actually, Peter was more like a typical disciple — a representative of all disciples — rather than the foundation rock of the church. What is more, we will find that Jesus calls Peter "a stumbling block to me (16:23)". In this way Matthew highlights "Peter's role as a negative example: the rock of the church and recipient of divine revelation is rebuked by Jesus as Satan when he ceases to listen to the voice of God."² The paradox here is that the same πέτρα on which the ἐκκλησία is to be built can also prove to be a σκάνδαλον. "This wordplay[rock and stumbling stone] provides a uniquely Matthean focus on the complexity of the role of Peter."³ It is fair to say that the same beatitude and rebuke of Jesus is open to anyone. Peter, only by the divine election of God, is the first example of all Jesus' disciples in a chronological way.

Therefore, "on this rock" does not refer to one disciple specifically, but the salvation-historical event that Jesus will start his new church on a new basis. People do not put new wine into old wineskins, but put new wine into fresh wine skins (Matt 9:17). Jesus created new groups of God's people instead of relying on the OT tradition. All disciples of Jesus, including Gentiles, are considered living stones of the church (1 Pet 2:5). Peter was not the first rock of the church, but the

¹ Keener, Craig. *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 271.

² Yong-Eui Yang, *Picture of Peter in Matthew's Gospel-The Rock and Stumbling Stone*, (신약연구, 2010), 19.

³ France, R. T. *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*. Eugene, (Oreg.: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 245.



first witness of the paradigm shift of the church in salvation history. Thus Kingsbury argues that Matthew both sets Peter in a unique position,¹ which he describes as a "salvation-historical primacy," and at the same time regards him as "the typical disciple, who both in his failures and in his role of leadership offers a model for other disciples."²

Thirdly, Jesus is the chief cornerstone of the church (Eph 2:20). In Matthew 16:18-19, the ἐκκλησία is not that of Peter, but that of Jesus, built by him.³ We have seen the rock images in the OT that point to Christ most of the time. Moses strikes the rock, and water comes out to save the assembly of Israel. The cracked rock is a typology of Jesus' body splitting in the cross (1 Cor 10:4). That is why God punished Moses when he struck the rock with his rod twice because Jesus' passion is once for all. There is no need to strike the rock twice, thus speaking to the rock is just enough (Num 20:8). The rock imagery in Daniel 2 also indicates that only the Son of Man is the rock. This stone is "not cut out by any human hand," and it has a dominating and disastrous effect upon other kingdoms.⁴ The Son of Man is Jesus Christ, and he will bring justice to all the earth.

What is more, those who try to attribute the unique identity—the foundation rock of the church—to Peter's confession, they have to admit the fact that this confession comes from the revelation of the heavenly Father (16:17). It is not the work of Peter in flesh and blood, but the work of the Father, and Peter, as the spokesman of disciples, has the right response to God's revelation. Jesus declares with no little fervor that only by divine revelation is knowledge of his divine

¹ Kingsbury, JBL 98(1979) 67-83, esp.pp.80-83. Cf., more briefly, E. Schweizer, in Stanton, *Interpretation*, 135-137.

² France, R. T. *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*. Eugene, (Oreg.: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 246.

³ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁴ Patrick Schreiner. Peter, the Rock: Matthew 16 in Light of Daniel 2. *Criswell Theological Review* (2016): 101.



sonship possible.¹

Finally, there is also a contrast—wrong paradigm to the right paradigm—with the rejection of Jewish people and the confession of Peter. The paradigm shift was also manifested in the old covenant community (the Jewish public) to the new covenant community (the church made of disciples). The term ἐκκλησία was the translation of לְקָהָל in the LXX, which refers to the gathering of Israelites at Mount Sinai when they enter the covenant (Deut 4:10; 9:10; 18:16). The word was also often combined with יְהוָה, which became the covenant terminology for the congregation/assembly of Yahweh (Deut 23:2, 4, 9). The first paradigm shift of ἐκκλησία happened when God set his love upon and choose Israelites from among all peoples (Deut 7:7). The ἐκκλησία was made of God's chosen people based on bloodlines. The second shift happened here in Matthew 16:18 that Jesus built the ἐκκλησία community based on faith in Christ, not the way in their daily secular physical assemblies. Because of this paradigm shift, the ἐκκλησία was not made of Jews outwardly in the flesh, but inwardly in the spirit (Rom 2:28-29).

To sum up, Peter is the prototype of the pneumatic human being who "comprehended the building of the church in himself, effected by the Word, and thus gained strength."² As the spokesman of disciples, Peter is the symbolization of the ecclesiological paradigm shift from the OT to the NT. This shift first appeared in the historical salvation event in Matthew 16:15-16, and the way of being witnessed were through Peter's confession. This event was a turning point of the kingdom of heaven because from that moment, the incarnation of God's son was recognized and new groups of God's people, including Gentiles, the ἐκκλησία came into being in reality.

¹ Kingsbury, Jack D. *Matthew as Story*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 113.

² Luz, Ulrich. *Studies in Matthew*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 169.



The Authority of the Church

The keys of the kingdom of heaven and the "binding and loosing" vision demonstrate the authority of the church. The authority belongs not only to Peter but to all who share his proclamation of Jesus' identity.¹ The key of the kingdom of heaven is not entrusted to Peter alone, but to the whole church community. The key itself is the message of the gospel, and the master of the key is Christ. God will lay the key of David's house on His shoulder. He will open, and no one will shut. He will shut, and no one will open (Isa 22:22; Rev 3:7). The owner of the keys is definitely Jesus Christ himself, and he entrusts the keys to his church. The authority of the church also comes from Jesus' empowerment. Therefore, the key is the synonym of authority. We should also be aware that the abyss also has a key that belongs to Christ (Rev 1:18; 9:1; 20:1). This indicates the fact that all authority has been given to Jesus in heaven and on earth (Matt 28:18).

We must focus on the core authority of the church, which is the "binding and loosing" image. This image is the core of Matthew's Gospel, including salvation and judgment. Scholars have different explanations of what "binding and loosing" means, such as applications of the Law according to different situations in Josephus, exorcism, forgiveness of sins, or identification of sins.² "It seems unlikely that the first evangelist would have favored the notion that the church can forgive sins; he seems to guard against this interpretation by the following addendum (18:15-35)."³

¹ Keener, Craig. *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 272.

² Dennis C. Duling, "Binding and Loosing: Matthew 16:19; Matthew 18:18; John 20:23," *Foundations and Facets Forum* 3,4(1987):3-31.

³ Powell, Mark Allan, "Binding and Loosing: A Paradigm for Ethical Discernment from the Gospel of Matthew," *Currents in Theology and Mission*(2003):439.



For Matthew, the "binding and loosing" may refer to God's authority of judgment transferring to the church's authority of discipline. In the OT, "binding" is associated with God's judgment on His people, and "loosing" is free from God's sovereignty (Isa 28:22, Eze 4:8, Zec 11:14). In Psalm 2, this messianic psalm also mentions the judgment on the Gentiles by using the "binding" vision (Psa 2:3, 9). The Judge of all the earth will bring justice to Jews and Gentiles, which means God's authority of "binding and loosing" applies to believers and non-believers. The key of the Kingdom of Heaven is a paradigm shift of judicial authority that has transferred from God to the church. In the OT, God brings justice by himself, but now the authority of judgment is entrusted to the church as a whole. The shift of judgment authority also happened after Jesus finished his mission — the authority of judgment from the Father was entrusted to the Son (John 5:22).

The "binding and loosing" is a judgment image that points to the authority of the church, including teaching and discipline. First, this authority is not secular government power but is only in the spiritual realm. Matthew is echoing the authority image of the key of heaven in Isaiah 22 when the key of David's house will be laid on the priest Eliakim. This is also a typology toward Christ because the description is the same as in Revelation: "He will open, and no one will shut. He will shut, and no one will open." (Isa 22:22; cf. Rev 3:7) We should notice that Eliakim is a priest, and the "binding and loosing" vision also connected with the priesthood, such as teaching and judging. "If the church is a temple, its leadership is naturally described in terms related to priestly responsibilities."¹ Therefore, the scope of the church's authority cannot extend to the secular power but is limited to the spiritual/priestly range. "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to the things that are God's." (Matt 22:21) This does not mean that God does not have

¹ Michael Patrick Barber, Jesus as the Davidic Temple Builder and Peter's Priestly Role in Matthew 16:16-19, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 132, no.4(2013):935.



authority over secular power—on the contrary, Jesus says to Pilate, "You would have no power at all against me unless it were given to you from above." (John 19:11) God did not entrust this part of the authority to his church but only the authority in the spiritual field.

Second, the keys are the compelling imagery of the church authority, which also in later texts relates to God's judgment on priests/shepherds (Isa 22:25; Rev 3:9). Especially, "there is a tradition, attested in both the Pseudepigrapha and the rabbinic literature, that when the Babylonians destroyed the temple, the keys of the sanctuary were somehow returned to the LORD because the priest had been unworthy stewards of them."¹ Therefore, the "binding and loosing" imagery is not only applied to believers and non-believers, but also to the church itself. The church is not the final Judge, but the spokesman of the Judge. As the "owner of the key," Peter manifests this further in his letter when the church is not faithful to God: "for the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God" (1 Pet 4:17).

Finally, the essence of church authority is church discipline. Some have understood "binding and loosing" to mean giving the church the authority to forgive and retain sin (because of the influence by John 20:23).² However, the authority to forgive sin belongs to God alone, and church discipline is an application of this authority. After all, Christ is our Mediator, not the church. Discipline is the practice of forgiveness and judgment. What is more, the Gospel of Matthew implies that the church as a whole has the authority to make its own standard of discipline within the biblical teaching.³ The authority is not given to individuals but to the whole leadership of the church—this is also the principle of

¹ Ibid.,946.

² Ibid.,950.

³ Mark Allan Powell, Binding and Loosing: A paradigm for Ethical Discernment from the Gospel of Matthew, *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 30:6(2003):445.



Matthew 18:15-20. I will talk about the pastoral function of discipline later, which is based on forgiveness and reconciliation. At the same time, we must be aware of the fact that church discipline can only be applied to church members, including true believers and the unregenerate. In other words, church discipline is valid only within the new covenant community, which has been revealed in the community rules in Matthew 18.

In conclusion, the keys of the kingdom of heaven represent the church authority from Jesus. The "binding and loosing" image manifests the salvation and judgment of God that points to the core authority of the church—church discipline. The spirit of church discipline is about forgiveness and reconciliation, and the discipline is not only applicable for individuals but also the church as the whole—the entire leadership. The authority of the church is only valid for the spiritual field because the civil authority, such as the authority to bear the sword, is not empowered to the church. (Rom 13:4-5)

The Church Community Rules in Matthew 18

The difference between Jewish and the new church community rules in Matthew marks the paradigm shift, which shows up from the conflicts between Jesus and Jewish public. The essence of community rules/laws is to seek forgiveness from God, but the shift is the way(not by our works but Jesus' works) to obtain forgiveness. In the OT, people have to obey the law to be accepted into the community, which means they need to fulfill the law by works. In the NT, people in the new church community can be forgiven by faith in a spiritual way. We will compare and see the most significant difference between the new church community and the Qumran community, which is a representative of a godly sect



of Judaism. This passage in Matthew 18 centers on corporate responsibility and is similar to Qumran's *Manual of Discipline*, for it establishes the rules of the community for dealing with members who sin.¹ The purpose of the Matthean community rules is to discipline and forgive, and the center of the Community Discourse (18:19-20) is the promise of Jesus' presence.²

The aim of the Qumran sect was to achieve a life of perfect purity in conformity with its own understanding of the requirements of the Torah.³ Therefore, they had strict rules to follow with mutual supervision. Some rules were even stricter than those from the authorities in Jerusalem, such as their 1000—cubits limit for as walk (about 500 meters) on the Sabbath compared to the rabbi's limit of 2000 (about 1000 meters). But the members of Qumran were not like hypocritical Pharisees—their piety was sincere. In the Hymns, they were penitent for their sins, both individually and as a group. They also trusted God's mercy for forgiveness, "He will wipe out my transgression through his righteousness."⁴ They believed in God's love, grace, and covenant, as well as the resurrection in the glorious future. "He may be one with children of Thy truth—that bodies gnawed by worms may be raised from the dust—to stand before Thee with the everlasting host...to be renewed together with all the living."⁵

We have to admit that Qumran had strict disciplines because of the fear of Yahweh, not merely a formal religion. Barrett comments: "It is impossible to read not only the Hymns but also many other parts of the Qumran literature without

¹ Osborne, Grant R. *Matthew*. ZEC.(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 684.

² Luz, Ulrich. *Studies in Matthew*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 378.

³ Barrett, C. K. *The New Testament Background: Writings from Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire That Illuminate Christian Origins*. Rev. Ed. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), 229.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 239.



being aware of warm and genuine piety."¹ The most significant difference between the community of Qumran and Christian was their motivation to keep the law. Qumran had the same motivation as Christians, and they both tried to interpret the OT with the right exegesis and application. From this perspective, Qumran really lived out the purpose of the OT—their practice of faith was even better than the Pharisee Saul, who believed he was found blameless concerning the righteousness of the law.

Qumran knew their weakness, and that is the reason they made much more strict community rules to make up for their sins. However, they still had to face the most significant problem: Confessing became the evidence that they could not keep the law, "for whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." (Jam 2:10) There is no atonement without Christ even for the smallest sin because "the wages of sin is death." (Rom 6:23) According to God's judgment standard, only death is the appropriate consequence for sin. Obviously, people cannot pay for their sins by death every time, and that is why we can see different kinds of punishment in the Community Rule. We can see that all the entire punishment system, including the whole ritual economy in the OT, is a symbolical typology of Jesus' passion and salvation. For Qumran, they have strict community rules without Christ, but for Matthew, the center of community rules is the presence of Jesus.

Therefore, the community rules in Matthew focus only on discipline, which is forgiveness and reconciliation in terms of the moral dimension. Compared with Qumran or the Jewish law, Matthew basically wipes out everything about the Jewish law, including ritual and civil law (but not moral), that is the reason why there are no community rules for Christians in Matthew. Speaking of the ritual and civil law in the OT, it is becoming old and grows aged is near to vanishing away.

¹ Ibid., 228.



(Heb 8:13) It does not mean that the law in the OT is passing away (Matt 5:18), but integrating into the NT. We can have a better understanding of a color mixing metaphor. If we mix red (civil law) and green (ritual law), it turns yellow (under grace not under law in the NT). Red and Green both still exist (not pass away!) in the Yellow, even though it seems that both colors disappear after the mixing. The "mixing" progress in the NT can be regarded as the fulfillment of the law by Jesus. Therefore, because of Jesus' works, everyone in Christ can be under grace, not under law. (Rom 6:14) The laws in the OT are all "mixing" into the grace of God in the NT.

This is a significant paradigm shift because Jesus has fulfilled the law, and the church community should keep the law based on the works of Jesus, who has abolished in his flesh the hostility — the law of commandments contained in ordinances (Eph 2:15; Heb 7:18). In other words, we are not under the law, but we keep the law in a spiritual way. As disciples of Jesus, we are following the example of Jesus' reconciliation and are motivated by God's grace. The theme of discipleship is a significant component of Matthew's ecclesiology, and this true Israel is the sacred work and privilege of every disciple.¹ Now let us move to the content of the church community rules in Matthew 18:15-20.

First, it is interesting to find out that the same sequence appears in the Dead Sea Scrolls: private reproof, then before witnesses, and finally before the gathered assembly.² However, as we discussed above, while the goal of Qumran community rules is to punish, "the goal of Matthew is to reintegrate the offender rather than to exact a proper penalty."³ In the rabbinical community, they have to use

¹ Jose T J. Matthew's ecclesia: an exegetical study of Matthew 16:13-20. *Vidyajyoti: Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol 83, No 5(2019):318.

² Keener, Craig. *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 288.

³ Rikard Roitto. Reintegrative Shaming and a Prayer Ritual of Reintegration in Matthew 18:15-20. *Svensk Exegetisk årsbok* 79(2014):105.



punishment to meet the requirement of the law. However, since Jesus has fulfilled all the righteousness of the law, the goal of church community rules is to gain back your brother (18:15). The threefold discipline aims to help church members to repent sincerely. First, offenders are to talk in private and then with 2 or 3 people he or she respects, and finally, the whole church will help him or her. Moreover, the way to achieve this goal is not by following these steps mechanically, but through prayers (18:19). As people in Christ, we entrust the final decision-making authority to Jesus, as he promises his presence among us (18:20).

Second, we need to address sin in any circumstance and keep its influence in a minimum range. The purpose of these steps is not to punish church members but to help them reconcile with God. Many argue that the last stage is excommunication, which means these people should be viewed as a "Gentile or tax collector" and should be cut off from fellowship. However, the author of Matthew portrays tax collectors as people who, though initially resistant to God's will, are valued by Jesus as table companions.¹ We should remember that Jesus is called "a friend of tax collectors and sinners (Matt 11:19)," which means the whole church should spend more time with and love on these people. "In the context of chapter 18 as a whole, verse 17 refers not to a penalty but to a call for re-evangelization."² To treat a church member as a Gentile will help the sinner from his/her dangerous state of sinfulness,³ and the church should practice the "binding and loosing" authority through prayers.

Finally, "the parable of the unforgiving servant, which follows immediately after the teachings on church discipline and forgiveness, should give pause to

¹ Sharyn Dowd. Is Matthew 18:15-17 About "Church Discipline"? *Scripture and Traditions: Essays on Early Judaism and Christianity* (2008):146.

² Ibid.,149.

³ Rikard Roitto. Reintegrative Shaming and a Prayer Ritual of Reintegration in Matthew 18:15-20. *Svensk Exegetisk årsbok* 79(2014):181.



anyone tempted to use the community's authority abusively."¹ In the Rabbinic mode, the binding and loosing paradigm needs to change according to a new situation—individuals bring the rabbis new circumstances to determine whether or not they should be bound to exist law.² Therefore, the church has the authority to make its own discipline within the teachings of Scripture, but nobody should abuse the authority without accountability. That is another issue about church governance, which is really hard to confirm the form of church governance in Matthew's time. But we should be aware of the principle that stewardship is the role of the church, which has to be held accountable to God as a faithful and wise servant (Matt 24:45). Moreover, the work of the Holy Spirit and the presence of Jesus will also guide the submissive church to use their disciplinary authority.

The Application of the Matthean Ecclesiology Today

The church in Matthew is a symbol of the paradigm shift of Jesus' work. God has been forming a new community through Christ instead of the chosen people, Israel. The old is not discarded but renewed by the Messiah. The ecclesiology turning point in Matthew 16 indicates that Jesus is the one who entrusts divine authority to the new church. The authority of the church is about discipline, which is made of forgiving and reconciliation. The church also has the authority to make its own steps of discipline, but the goal is the same to help people reconcile with God. Therefore, it is crucial for the church today to apply the Matthean ecclesiology with mercy and forgiveness.

¹ Bridget Illian. Church Discipline and Forgiveness in Matthew 18:15-35. *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37,6(2010): 450.

² Rudy Baergen. "Binding and Loosing" in Matthew 18:18 and the Mennonite Church Canada 2016 Decision on Sexuality. *The Conrad Grebel Review* (2018):18.



However, "the important point to recognize is that forgiveness goes beyond a mere mental construct, an understanding of the concepts communicated in the text, and there will always be a difference between what the individual reader or scholar constructs in his or her mind and what the social world constructs as a historical reality."¹ That is why we need the Holy Spirit to work through the church community in different circumstances. In the end, the church should hand over its authority to the Holy Spirit. The application of ecclesiology in Matthew is dynamic, which means different churches will have different standards of discipline, even though we have the same Scripture. We do not judge other people or churches that making different decisions because, for one thing, that particular scenario is unrepeatable. The motivations, feelings, emotions, and subconscious that recorded as text can only be considered as speculative, and it is difficult to reconstruct original facts as spectators. For another thing, the work of the Holy Spirit is unpredictable and non-reproducible. Churches have to trust the guidance of the Holy Spirit and hold each other accountable in front of God with a pure conscience. We cannot just follow the steps in Matthew 18 mechanically and expect the reconciliation outcome. We need to apply the principle of reconciliation by adjusting our strategies in different motivations and circumstances.

First of all, do not cover sin under any circumstances, or it will be like a little yeast that leavens the whole lump (1 Cor 5:6). Sin will not be resolved itself automatically over time—someone has to deal with it. The more sin you amass, the tighter it is to deal with it. Sin will not be solved unless one begin to face it. The church leaders and church members should not hide sin but have the responsibility to address sin. "A community capable of protecting the little ones, a community who cares for the lost sheep, is a community that cannot afford to

¹ Dion A. Forster. A public theological approach to the (im)possibility of forgiveness in Matthew 18:15-35: Reading the text through the lens of integral theory. *In die Skriflig / In Luce Verbi* (2017):8.



overlook one another's sins because doing so keeps the community from embodying the life of grace determined by God's forgiveness through the sacrifice of his Son."¹

Second, private sins should be dealt with in private, and public sins should be dealt with in public. The principle of three stages of discipline in Matthew 18 is to limit the influence of sins and to help reconcile with God and men. We should deal with sins seriously with the right strategies; otherwise, adverse effects such as rumor and gossip will arise. A simple case will help us a little further. If a church member committed adultery and nobody knew about it, then the church leaders should take care of that individual's sins in private. However, if the woman was pregnant because of adultery, then it was God that decided to make it public, so the church must do the same. They should confess in front of the whole church and seek reconciliation with God and the church.

Third, the center of church authority in Matthew 16 is church discipline, and the purpose of church discipline in Matthew 18 is to seek forgiveness with unflinching love through prayers. The church community will reflect God's verdict in all such decisions, and Matthew 18:19-20 both apply prayer theology to the process.² The church has the authority to limit and forgive sins, but nobody—especially church leaders—should abuse this power to lord over the flock (1 Pet 5:3). Every church has its own community rules and regulations to make harmony, and the way to achieve its goals is to submit to the Scripture and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Above all, the nature of church authority is spiritual and not of this world. That is why we should think about "God's thoughts" instead of "Human thoughts," and as the stewards of the keys of heaven, we are all accountable before God. The

¹ Stanley Hauerwas. *Matthew*. (Brazos Press, 2006), 165.

² Osborne, Grant R. *Matthew*. ZEC. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 689.



spiritual power is upside down with the worldly power, and the one who is governing is the one who serves (Luke 22:26).

The Early Rain Covenant Church Decisions in Schism

The biggest dilemma for the application of church authority is dealing with the leaders who are entrusted with the church authority. Who can discipline pastors and elders if they sin against God or church members? How does the church apply the ecclesiological principle to church leaders? As a pastor in the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, I will discuss the church split in 2017 from the point of view of church authority and discipline. I need to clarify that even though I am not a bystander of this event, it is still hard to reconstruct facts because of the non-repeatable motivations and emotions in that unique situation. We cannot guess people's motivations, and our Lord will judge his people.

First, church discipline is always complicated. Simple conflicts will not come to church discipline, which is why the first stage in Matthew 18 encourages people to seek private solutions. Sins should be solved in time before causing more damage to the church community. The conflict between two pastors—Wang Yi and Wang Hua Sheng—in Early Rain Church has not been settled for years, and that became the "yeast" of the church split. Time is irreversible. We cannot assume what has happened, and we must face the present problem. That is the reason we have stages 2 and 3 in Matthew 18. But what if the last two steps fail, especially dealing with the sins of church leaders? That brings us to the second point.

Second, I believe the most effective way to deal with church leaders who have authority in church governance is for them to stop serving—full stop. That was the suggestion I made in the last elders' meeting before the split. I think the best



way to stop the church split in that situation would be the removal of the two pastors' governance authority for one year. Our senior pastor, Wang Yi, made a motion in response to my suggestion: "According to this situation, I believe all the elders are incompetent in terms of church governance. Therefore, I suggest that all the elders and pastors should be removed from office, and we should hold another election for new leaders in the church congregational meeting." Of course, no elders would agree with it, and he was just trying to avoid being removed from duty by proposing the motion. But I guess that could be a turning point to prevent split if they had accepted my suggestion. After the church split in 2017 Easter, we had come across the severe persecution in 2018. All the elders and pastors were forcedly removed from their office by the Chinese government, and I guess this was a good lesson from God.

Finally, we should accept the fact that it does not always work to follow the instruction of Matthew 18. Sometimes we meant it for evil, but God meant it for good (Gen 50:20). We are not under the power and law of sin, but we will still be influenced by sins until the second coming of Jesus. It is OK that we cannot have forgiveness and reconciliation in the short term, and because of the same Lord, we can still have hope and faith in Christ.

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