

GOING TO YOUR BROTHER

There is a passage in Matthew's gospel which, if understood and properly applied, could accomplish a great deal in keeping the Church a harmonious, loving, supporting family group. Yet that instruction seems often misunderstood, is often avoided, and even when it *is* invoked, it too often doesn't bring the results it was intended to bring. I am talking about the passage in Matthew chapter 18:

Matthew 18:15 "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."

It's just a couple of lines—so what could be so difficult in that?

Firstly, as in all Bible Study we need to put that passage into some form of context. The 18th chapter of Matthew begins with what has been an often repeated discussion, perhaps more than a discussion—a debate, or probably more accurately an argument—among the disciples about which of them should be in the ascendancy over the others.

This time, having been unable once again to come to any sort of agreement about it, they brought the question to Christ.

Matthew 18:1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

. . . or, "Who *is going* to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" This wasn't a technical question such as, "Do you think it will be Moses?" or "Do you think it could be Elijah . . . or someone else?" No, they meant "Which of *us* do you think is going to be greatest?" Each one, in his own mind, was sure that he knew the answer to that question. We should remember that there was a lot of feeling amongst these followers on this matter. Tempers could become frayed when this kind of ambition and self-elevation began to run rampant.

Before we continue in Matthew 18 I would like to look at another occasion when this argument bubbled to the surface.

Matthew 20:20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee (James and John) came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something.

She didn't tell Him what it was she was going to ask for. I guess she more or less said, "Would you do something for me?"

21 And he said to her, "What do you want?" . . .

"It isn't anything much; just a small favor, nothing really worth mentioning."

21 . . . She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom."

"I don't really want much. It's a simple thing. I just want *my* two boys to be right at the top of the tree. Under You, I want them to be first and second in the kingdom. That's all. It's just a little thing I am asking."

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22 Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking . . .”

The boys were with her so He turned to them and said:

22 “. . . Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.”

“Yes, we *are* able! No problem!”

23 He said to them, “You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”

Notice this though:

24 And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers.

Jesus called them over and said, “Outside the Church, outside there in the world, being in charge is a thing to be sought after because it gives you the opportunity to lord it over other people. But it shouldn’t be like that with you. If you really want to score ‘brownie points’ with God, become a servant. Take on the role of a servant.”

It’s interesting that the Greek word *aganakteo* translated “indignant” includes in its meanings, “feel angry,” “became incensed,” and “became very much offended.” This argument, this exposition of raw ambition, caused a great deal of feeling. It caused some very raw feelings and could cause offence. That is true whenever this sort of thing happens. When people let their human nature run unchecked there is always a danger that some are going to get hurt and some are going to become offended.

It is interesting that Jesus Christ tells them that what they need to do is to replace their self-assertion with an attitude of humility—and seek, not to dominate the others, but to serve the others. In Matthew 18 He begins to talk to the disciples about the need for great humility as we deal with one another to avoid causing offence.

Matthew 18:2 (Revised Standard Version) **and calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them,**

3 and said, “truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

4 Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

5 “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me;

6 but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”

He is putting a great deal of emphasis on not causing someone else to stumble, not giving offence; not by your attitude and your self-elevation to cause other people to get upset or to sin or to become offended.

He then goes on to say, “On top of that you need to be very careful about not sinning yourself.”

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7 “Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the man by whom the temptation comes!

8 And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.

9 And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.”

He is not really talking about maiming yourself or blinding yourself. He is talking about an attitude of mind that will do anything that is necessary to avoid sinning. He is saying, “You need to be really careful about the way you deal with one another. You need to have a lot more humility. You don’t want to offend each other. It’s a terrible thing if you really cause somebody else to stumble. And it’s a terrible thing if you begin on a path of sin. Whatever causes you to go down that path, be ready to just cut it out of your life and take whatever action is necessary to get back onto the right path.”

Hopefully we can begin to see a flow in this 18th chapter; these are not random things. Jesus is developing a theme of pivotal points that have a great bearing on successful interpersonal relationships within a group.

Following right on in that flow He now addresses a situation where somebody within the group has either engineered themselves or who has been engineered into a position of isolation from at least some of the members of the larger group. He addresses this point speaking in physical terms and using the analogy of a shepherd’s flock of sheep from which one has wandered away. As we read this, remember He is not talking about sheep. He uses that analogy, but He is still on the same theme. He is talking about interpersonal relationships. He says:

10 “See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my father who is in heaven.”

He is saying, “Be very careful the way you treat one another, the way you deal with one another, the way you relate to one another. Be *very* careful.” Then He says:

12 “What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?

13 And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.

14 So it is not the will of my father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

The implication is very clear. In God’s eyes, if someone gets himself or herself into a place they shouldn’t be, whether through their own fault or as a result of things others do, then if we have the mind of Christ, we should feel a compunction to go and get them back to where they need to be.

The image that God wants us to have in our mind is that of a shepherd who has gone to the rescue of one of his sheep and brings it back—if necessary, lovingly cradled in his arms. This is the background that we need to have in mind as we better seek to understand this passage about going to our brother.

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Let's now look at that passage a little more closely. We are told that this course of action should be invoked "if your brother sins against you." The Greek verb that is translated "sins" here is the verb *hamartano*. It means "to miss the mark," "to sin," "to commit an offence." The implication from the text is that whatever the problem is, it is ongoing.

The verb is said, by Strong's Concordance, to be "active." This means "ongoing." As we read on, we get the sense that what is required on behalf of that individual is to acknowledge the problem and to change.

I want us to be very clear that when it says, "If your brother sins against you," this is not talking of a one-off comment; this is not talking of somebody who has had a hard day and has said something nasty to you that they shouldn't have said. This is not talking about a one-off thing that has upset you. This is talking about an ongoing problem, not an isolated incident.

I want you to think of something else as well. The *New Bible Commentary* supplies this:

"The words *against you* were probably not part of the original text and unhelpfully restrict the scope. Response to personal injury will come into focus in vs 21–35. Here it is the brother's danger, not any effect of his sin on me personally, which is at issue."

If you were to look at the account in Luke's gospel you will see this phrase "against you," isn't used.

Luke 17:3 Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him,

It doesn't say "If your brother sins *against you*." The feeling is that the phrase "against you" wasn't in the original Greek. Incidentally, the phrase that is used in Luke, "Pay attention to yourselves!" probably means more than just "Look out for yourself!" The *Bible Exposition Commentary* states that this expression "pay attention to yourselves" means that "we should lovingly watch over each other and do all that we can to keep each other from sinning."

So when we begin to take this on board we see that we need to take a somewhat wider view and not merely excuse ourselves from taking action if we see someone drifting into a pattern of sin and we can't say, "It's not directed against me—so it's got nothing to do with me." "I know he's doing this . . . but he's never done anything to me so it's none of my business."

No. We have a responsibility to one another; we are one another's keeper.

At this point we might make mention again the timing of such helpful intervention. All the indications are that the sin being spoken is more of an ongoing situation rather than a one-off slip. We are all human beings and, as such, we are spiritually a work in progress. This means there will probably be many times when we make mistakes, when we miss the mark ourselves, when we say things that we shouldn't have said—or at least we say things in a way that we shouldn't have said them.

If we were to each take it upon ourselves to go to our brother every single time we consider their performance to have been not what it should be, I would suggest that since our ability and accuracy in seeing faults in others is so highly developed, we might spend our time doing little else! After Services you wouldn't be found talking amongst yourselves; you would be forming

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neat queues waiting to bring some slip, some fault, some look or some innuendo to your brother's attention. It's not supposed to be that. It means if you see someone who is drifting into an area of missing the mark, and you are concerned for them, like the shepherd who goes off to find the lamb that has strayed, you want to try to bring them back. It's not a one-off thing.

We get the flavor of that when we read the following passage:

Matthew 7:1 “Judge not, that you be not judged.

2 For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

3 Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log (the plank) that is in your own eye?

4 Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye?

5 You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.”

Jesus isn't saying that we should never go to offer help—but that our emphasis should be on ensuring that we truly are *able* to help first. Perhaps in thinking about when we should go to our brother alone, another way of saying that it is not a one-off thing, it is when someone is drifting into an area that they don't want to be in, we need to (as our friends across the pond might say) cut one another a bit of slack in this regard.

We have to realize that we probably all make mistakes.

When people in the Church realize that they've made a mistake, that they've been a bit harsh in what they have said or they know that they have hurt someone, God's Spirit working in their lives will usually prick their conscience. They will recognize that and they will correct the problem themselves. We need to give people a little bit of time, cut them a little bit of slack to let that process work.

The kind of thing that is being spoken of in Matthew 18 as something that we should address with a brother is an ongoing problem that they seemingly cannot see—and if that problem is allowed to go on unchecked it is going to cause them lasting harm.

The next part of the instruction about going to a brother is that you should go and tell him his fault “between you and him alone.”

Everything that we have looked at up to this point should be shouting at us right now about the manner and the attitude of our approach. We should have *great* humility, a desire not to want to hurt and not to want to cause any offence to this person who is already hurting themselves. We should have an attitude of gentleness, an attitude of care and love.

Notice how Paul put it when he was writing to the Galatians:

Galatians 6:1 Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression . . .

When it says “caught” it doesn't mean that somebody spotted them going into a cinema to watch a film they shouldn't have been watching. It means they are *caught up*; they have

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somehow begun to do something that really represents missing the mark. They are caught up in it. They are entangled in it.

1 . . . you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

What do we take from this? If we see someone who is getting involved in things that they shouldn't really be getting involved in and is missing the mark, we should go to discuss the matter in a spirit of gentleness—not a pretence of gentleness, but a spirit of *genuine* gentleness. Not only is this the right way to go, it also happens to be the way with the very best chance of success. We should go, seeking to lovingly help the individual the way we ourselves would like to be helped, if the roles were reversed.

The *Bible Exposition Commentary* states that the word translated “restore” in Galatians 6:1 (“You who are spiritual should restore such a one . . .”) is a Greek medical term that means to set a broken bone. Imagine the patience, the tenderness and the gentleness that you would need to use if you were trying to set a broken bone. It makes the point that we cannot just say, “In that case, if it's that hard, I'd rather just not do it.” We have a responsibility to really try to help one another in such circumstances. As the Bible tells us, we are our brother's keeper.

James also addresses such a situation:

James 5:19 My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back,

20 let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

The expression “wanders from the truth” again emphasizes that this is an ongoing situation. It's not talking about a one-off mistake, when somebody has dropped their guard and has said or done something they shouldn't. It's an ongoing situation. It's the beginning of what could ultimately become a falling away that would put the individual into great danger.

We should note from what James says that the purpose of going to them, the purpose of the intervention is restoration—not condemnation. I have seen the opposite done. Someone has gone to someone else with a stern face and steely, focused, eyes. “I want to talk to you about something.”

You can see that the whole attitude is one of condemnation, indictment. “I know what you've done and I'm here to tell you . . .” I have seen this happen. (I've probably done it.)

It's not condemnation we are looking at; what Christ is putting forward is restoration. We are not going to argue with the individual but to try to help to bring about that restoration.

Yes, you might go and if you get into an argument, there's always the possibility that you might win the argument—and lose a brother forever! The image of the shepherd lovingly bringing back the sheep that had wandered off should never be far from our mind.

Perhaps another thing to keep in mind as we may enter such a situation is that our assessment of what is happening in this person's life might be wrong. We might *think* someone

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is backsliding in some way, but we just might not be in possession of all the facts or know the circumstances. Sometimes we listen to what someone says and we say, “I know what he *said*—but I know what he *meant* as well.” As human beings we have this tendency to want to read between the lines. That is akin to imputing motives.

People have said to me, “I know what you said—but I also know what you meant.”

I say, “How do you know what I meant? Are you a magician? Are you a mind reader? Are you taking on a course at the local technical college on mind reading? I meant what I said.”

“No you didn’t! You meant . . .”

But we can get it wrong. So this is another reason why, when we go to our brother, it needs to be with gentleness and with meekness. It has to be that way in such situations.

It also says we must go alone. For some reason, as human beings, we find that simple instruction extremely difficult to embrace. There is a sad side of human nature that seems to want the failings of others widely known. After all, doesn’t it make a nice, juicy, tidbit of gossip?

“Do you know what I saw Mr Ramsey doing yesterday?”

“Did you? I would never have thought it of him.”

Ears are suddenly pricked.

“Did you? Tell me more. He went where? No!”

This is human nature in the raw.

Sometimes people see someone drifting a little bit into an area they don’t want to be in but they don’t go alone, they talk to other people first. Then, when they are confronted with that, when somebody says, “Why didn’t you go on your own? Why did you talk to him . . . or her?” they usually come up with all sorts of excuses for having done so.

They will say things like, “I just wanted to see if anybody else had noticed what I had seen. That’s why I didn’t bother going alone.” Some get quite angry and say, “Surely you are not trying to suggest that I can’t talk to my friends?”

I am not suggesting anything; Christ said, “Go alone.”

“Well, I did go alone. But I just talked to Fred, Charlie, Jim and Mary before I went.”

That is not what Christ meant. It is not what you are supposed to do.

Somebody else might say, “I just thought that I would tell the minister about it.” That is not what it says! It doesn’t say, “If you see someone getting into a difficulty in their lives and drifting into a path of missing the mark, tell the minister.” It doesn’t say that.

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Some people say, “Yes, I know I told a few people about it—but I did it in the strictest of confidence. I told them, ‘I’m telling you this in strict confidence.’”

It would seem as well that the temptation to involve others is even greater if the person’s misdeeds have resulted in ourselves being hurt or offended in some way. That just ramps up the stakes and another feeling takes over; this time it is the overwhelming urge that we have to tell of that hurt in order to get sympathy or have other people on our side.

“Do you know what she said to me? I can’t believe it. The way she has been treating me lately, I just can’t . . .”

“Oh no! Did she do that? And she calls herself a Church member?”

What we are looking for is getting people on our side—and “if you can get the minister on your side, so much the better.”

If you begin to think any of those excuses is a reasonable justification, you need to think about *why* we are told to go to our brother alone. We can all probably recite by heart the golden rule given by Christ:

Matthew 7:12 “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”

We have to ask ourselves, “If I was the one with the problem, would I really want that failing to be publicized?”

I have seen people’s failings discussed with others “in absolute privacy.” “I’m only telling you this in confidence . . .”

And I’ve seen how those others have gone to others “in confidence,” “in total privacy.” “I don’t want you to pass this on.” Then we hear of stories coming back from far and wide about what this individual has supposedly done. Their character has been blackened.

Would you want that to happen to you? In the Bible we are told that love covers a multitude of sins. James quoted this.

James 5:20 let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

It is also mentioned by Peter:

1 Peter 4:8 Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.

Both James and Peter were actually quoting from a verse in the book of Proverbs that offers us a thought-provoking contrast.

**Proverbs 10:12 Hatred stirs up strife,
but love covers all offenses.**

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It's an act of loving concern for the individual to do exactly what Christ said, to keep the matter exclusively between yourself and the one you are trying to help. To go around trying to discuss the problem with others—whoever they may be, or whatever excuse you may use for doing so—is going to cause problems. It could cause strife and possibly end up even causing division within the Church. It is the very *opposite* of an expression of love.

A similar thought is expressed in:

**Proverbs 17:9 Whoever covers an offense seeks love,
but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.**

Covering an offence by not discussing it with others is an expression of love and therefore promotes love among the group. We are told that repeating or gossiping about the failures of another is bound to bring problems within the group. The group we are talking about is the Church.

Let's go back to one of those excuses that I mentioned for not going to a brother exclusively. This is the one which says, "I knew about this so I went and told the minister."

Some of us find going to a brother difficult. We find it a bit embarrassing to do—so it seems easier to merely drop a word in the minister's ear and feel we've done everything that we are supposed to do. If we did so we would be wrong. We would be wrong to think that. Why? As we have been reminding ourselves, that isn't what Christ told us to do. He didn't say that. He didn't say, "If you see a brother sinning, just pop out and tell the minister."

He said, "Go to your brother—on your own. Take nobody else. Don't involve anybody else."

I would say that if a situation has arisen where you really feel someone is making some serious mistakes in a way that signifies that they need some help and you are not sure how to proceed, then talk to the minister about how you should proceed—but keep the individual's identity out of it altogether. It's not a case of, "I'm getting really worried about Charlie. I've got to go and see him. Can you give me any advice?" If you do that, you have already broken what Christ said.

You might need to go to the minister and say, "Something is coming up and I need to go and talk to somebody following the instruction in Matthew 18:15. I don't want to talk to you about who it is, but I just need some advice. Can you give me some guidelines to help me achieve success in doing this?"

He doesn't know who it is but he will hopefully give you the right advice and guidelines.

There is one other person that you should discuss it with though. Before we go, we should always get help and guidance from God. Tell God what you are trying to achieve. Ask God for the right attitude and the ability to find the right words to gain success.

Ask God to help the person that you are going to talk to, to respond in the right way. Ask God for the outcome to be the restoration of that person from the point of danger that they find themselves in. That is the one Person you *can* talk to—because He already knows. Nobody else needs to know.

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But what if they just won't listen? Or what if you go and they give you the proverbial "flea in the ear." I would say that this should be a rare occasion among converted people—if (and I do emphasize this)—*if* everything that has been said up to this point has been carried out in the right frame of mind.

However Christ does give some further instruction.

Matthew 18:16 "But if he does not listen . . ."

If it doesn't work, if you are not getting through . . .

16 ". . . take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses."

This is a reference to a Scripture in Deuteronomy where it tells us that matters ought to be established before two or more witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15).

However, the way the wording comes out here makes this step possibly sound a bit more severe than we should see it. As I read this, it sounds a bit more like coming with a union delegation: "Right lads. Here he is. Before these witnesses I now charge you . . ." It just sounds a bit like that.

The *Bible Exposition Commentary* suggests it's more like asking some others to help to accomplish what we haven't been able to do on our own. What were we trying to do on our own? We were trying to restore—not indict, restore—not condemn.

Another commentary speaks of widening the discussion while bearing in mind that the overall objective is not recrimination and indictment but restoration of the individual and of your relationship with them.

Sometimes when a matter hasn't been sorted out between just two people, just the pressure of having one or two more join in the discussion can serve to focus the thinking and exert a gentle pressure to reconcile the matter.

We then come to the question, okay you've really made the very best try you can to bring this person back from where they are, restore them and get this whole thing sorted out, but it hasn't worked and you want to take step two. Now you ask the question, "Who then should be invited into the discussion?"

I have some suggestions. It should not be your closest friends or family or someone you feel will automatically take your side. If you are going to involve one or two other people it should be someone—or some people—you both respect for their integrity, for their wisdom and for their impartiality.

In my opinion it would be better not to make an attempt before the meeting to pre-program the people that you are going with. "I've had a bit of trouble. I need your help because I haven't been able to get him to see this. He's doing this . . ." All of a sudden their minds are already aligned.

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It might be better to say, “Look, I need you to come and I need you to try to help sort out a situation here. I don’t want to tell you about it; let’s just go and you’ll see what the parameters of it are when you are there.”

This should also be coupled with the fact that your demeanor as you go with these others, and their demeanor also, should be to win the individual, rather than condemn the individual. You are not a deputation from the boiler makers. You are going as friends, trying to help someone out of a dangerous position that they’ve got themselves into.

As this wider discussion progresses, always be ready to acknowledge or repent of anything you might have done wrong or any part of your understanding that may have been incomplete. Be ready to say, “Look, I didn’t understand that. I’m sorry. I made a mistake there,” because you want to come out of this closer to this person than you were before you went into it.

Again, I would say that in dealing with really converted people, the number of times that both of those steps (going on your own and then widening the discussion to include one or two others) would fail would be very, very low indeed. Therefore the third step should really be seen as a last resort.

Matthew 18:17 “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.”

If the individual, despite the increased pressure, refuses to move and refuses to acknowledge or repent in any way, then we are told to tell it to the Church. I do not believe for one second that we are being told to do a round of all the members. I think it should be best understood as referring to the Church government. In other words, at this time, this is the point where you have to involve the ministry because the final outcome of someone refusing to listen, even to the ministry, would inevitably be disfellowshipment which, of necessity, involves the minister.

I think it is worth reminding ourselves though that disfellowshipment itself isn’t merely a reprisal or a punishment. It is a means of exerting a bit more pressure on the individual to bring about repentance, forgiveness and restoration.

So steps one, two and three, where the person becomes at least temporarily debarred from attending services, are all to bring about the restoration of the individual.

In 1st Corinthians we read about the individual who had been having some sort of illicit relationship with his mother-in-law. Paul says, “Put him out.” Then, in 2nd Corinthians he tells them, “Bring him back. This guy has repented. He has changed and I am so pleased. He has been restored. That’s good.” That is what the whole thing is about.

I would also like to say that I am not giving this material because I think we have a problem here in this process. I am giving this material because traditionally, ever since I came into the Church nearly 45 years ago, it has always been a problem area in the Church.

Finally, we should bear in mind the context that we spoke of at first and that Christ stressed: the need for humility, gentleness, a concern for one another, never seeking to be hurtful, never seeking to be offensive, never seeking to be vindictive—always wanting the best for the other person.

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Hopefully we can see that if that is our approach, if that is our purpose, then faithfully doing what Christ tells us in Matthew 18 should result in closer, more harmonious and more supportive congregations in God's Church. And who wouldn't want that! ❖