

## Matthew 18:15-17 as a Model for Conflict Resolution among Nigerian Christians

Funke Elizabeth Oyekan<sup>1</sup>, Victor Umaru<sup>1</sup>, Jonathan O. Enyemike<sup>1</sup>,  
Oluwaseun L. Adedotun<sup>1</sup>, Sunday Olatunji Olayinka<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Religious Studies Programme, College of Liberal Studies, Bowen University, Iwo.

Corresponding Author: [Funke Elizabeth Oyekan](#)

**Abstract:** The Church is the body of Christ redeemed and bought by his blood to reconcile men back to him. However, pieces of evidence reveal that the Church is not without conflict situations, negatively affecting the Church's reputation. Church conflicts lead to violence, separation and litigations. Christian communities usually set up reconciliation committees at the local and national levels but to no avail. Besides, scholars have suggested various ways of settling conflicts through seminars, conferences, journal publications, and books. All efforts seem not to be working, as some church conflicts ended in violence, separation, and eventually, litigations. The study attempts a historico-grammatical analysis of Matthew 18:15-17 to examine Jesus' response and its value in resolving church conflicts. The study revealed that Jesus' model is faster, less expensive, cooperative, and less competitive. It improves the relationships of disputing parties' disciplines erring church members and aids in regaining repentant Christian believers. The study recommends that church leaders adopt Jesus' model in resolving conflict situations, allowing brotherly love to prevail and seeking peace and unity in the Body of Christ.

**Keywords:** Reconciliatory models, Matthew 18:15-17, Conflict resolution, Church Organisations.

### Introduction

Conflict or dispute, as would be used synonymously in this article, is a situation that happens as people go about complex and tasking life situations. It is inevitable (Egielewa, P. E. et al, 2024), not only now, but in the future (Kieliszek, 2019). Conflict is experienced

in the sacred society - the Church. Mayer (1990) considered dispute/conflict as a “disagreement which crops up out of people’s or group’s misgiving of a trait of jeopardy as opposed to their interests,” which is often wrong and wrongly expressed. Although conflict could have certain advantages, it is right to say that conflict, as observed today even among Christians, should be viewed as an adverse incident resulting from an odd disposition and state of affairs. A significant negative approach to conflict is that “the disputants have a propensity to perceive tapered options and finite resources accessible to them in the hunt for solutions rather than composite possibilities that may exist ‘outside the box’” (Healey,1995). Conflict potentially endangers relationships. However, it is not a problem in remoteness as its resolution or escalation is determined by how the parties involved barter with the situation (Lloyd, 2007). A proper and effective conflict resolution strategy and approach can provide growth opportunities which would strengthen the bond between the conflicting parties (Bercovitch, 1984). The strategy pinpointed by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-17 as an alternative conflict resolution can be of great benefit in providing disputants effective conflict resolution strategy. As a community of faith, the Church universally belongs to a new Kingdom with a culture different from that of the world and, therefore, should adhere to the principles of their new kingdom as instructed by the King, in conflict resolution and other matters.

## Literature Review

The word “Conflict” etymologically came from the Latin word “Confligere,” which means “to strike together” and is technically defined as disagreement, resentment or hostility between people in a social group (Albert, 2011). Conflict could be in the form of antagonistic psychological relations such as incompatibility, differing interests, and emotional hostility, or manifest in antagonistic interactions such as violence, and unregulated struggles (Fink, 1986). Coser (1956) sees conflict as struggling to secure status, power and resources, to the extent of relegating or hurting the rivals. In Conflicts, two parties with incompatible goals strive to reach a common goal (Schmid, 2000). The principal instigator of conflict is interest over resources, power, identity, belief, property, identity and status (Rasheed 2008; Nwolisa, 2006). It involves self-actualisation and the effort to ensure that an individual’s proposal is accepted. Conflict involves both danger, which may result in violence and, opportunity, which may be a challenge (Gultang, 1996). Almost all men, in every career, get ready for discerned threats to the reality of their lives (Crocker et al, 2001; Howard, 2001). Other causes include communication failure, lack of cooperation, non-compliance with rules, substandard performance, resource competition and differences in responsibility, authority, personality, methodological

value and goal (Drukkham, 1993). Conflict and competition are closely related as competing interests not handled well result in conflicts (Remi2013).

There is always the fear that conflicts are dangerous, go with anger and can never bring anything good or positive. However, conflict is not a disastrous monster but an opportunity to get the best out of a social relationship and get right out of wrong if such conflicts are appropriately managed (Gultang, 1996). It is a learning experience for the parties involved (Aiyede, 2006) and dialogue is a bridge against hostility in dissenting voices (Howe, 1963). Conflict is a natural and inevitable experience as long as people come together. Man is created differently, his genealogy is different from others, and his environment impacts his worldview and approaches to issues. This results in the diversification of interests and philosophical views. To approach is to tend to do something or to move in a direction that will be pleasurable and satisfying, while to avoid is to resist doing something, perhaps because it will not be pleasant (Okeke, 2006).

The four types of conflicts according to Folger (1997), are Intra-Personal Conflict, Inter-Personal Conflict, Intra-Group Conflict and Inter-Group Conflict which are conflicts that occur within an individual, between two or more individuals, between individuals or factions within a group and between two or more party groups respectively. Boulding (1962), on the other hand, identifies Relationship Conflicts, Data Conflicts, Interest Conflicts, Structural Conflicts, and Value Conflicts as five types of conflicts. Ethnic conflicts impact society and the youths negatively (Abdul-Jelil, 2008; Adebani 2005).

One unabated kind of conflict is religious conflict. Kukah (1999) maintains that most faith offers adherents something they are glad to live and die for, which is undoubtedly the reason behind religious intolerance leading to this kind of conflict. Akinola (2005) explained that religion is one of the human inventions with mixed effects on society; while it has the potency of inspiring the noblest spiritual values and selflessness, linking mortals to the ultimate reality, it can also instigate beastly behaviours such as hypocrisy, charlatanism, sleaze, and fanaticism. Wellman and Tokuno (2004) state that religious conflict could mean the menace or actual execution of actions with a latent aptitude for physical, emotional, or psychological damage on a person or group of persons for the sake of a particular religious faith. The menace of religious conflict could be seen in the words of Agang (2011) as, "the finished product of human distorted facts and figures to cover up the sin of injustice" (p.34). Boer (2003) opines that corruption and conflict are two fundamental problems confronting pluralistic religious societies. The causes of religious conflicts include doctrinal factors (Ekwenife and Nayak 2008), intolerance and fanaticism (Sulaiman, 2010), and erroneous religious and loss of ethical orientation (Hurst 1992)

## Nigerian Christians in Conflicts

Nigerian Christians can be said to be products of their environment. They are caught in the webs of economic, ethno-political, ethno-religious and domestic conflicts. Economically, Nigeria is blessed with arrays of human and material resources. These include petroleum oil, mineral wealth and agricultural produce. All states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria are blessed with both human and material resources. However, these resources are limited in supply. Hence there is always competition to gain the usage, access and profit for the use of these resources. The resources are, however, limited in supply (Dzurgba, 2006). This eventually leads to conflict at the local, state or Federal levels (Bello and Ojo, 2023; Ekeuwei and Akpan, 2022). Christians also compete to gain access to these economic resources for their livelihood.

Secondly, ethno-political conflict is a bane within Nigerian society. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic society. This affects relationships especially when it comes to devolution of power. Almost every ethnic group wants power to be domiciled within their ethnic group. Nigerian election is often marred with campaigns for ethnic superiority and succession (Oyewole and Jamiu, 2023). The South Eastern people felt marginalised and sidelined, so there was political apathy in the 2019 general elections (Ugbagu and Magnus, 2023). The arrest of Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, a South Easterner, by the Nigerian Government on June 29, 2021, gave rise to the Monday sit-at-home order by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the Southeast- Nigeria (Owoeye, Ezeanya and Obiegbonam, 2022). It impacts socioeconomic activities and leads to death as offenders are gunned down at times (Uchime and Molokwu, 2023). This is binding on Christians also.

Ethno-religious conflict exist both within and outside of the church. It threatens national integration as Nigerian citizens have affinities to ethnic identity, and security (Udom and Okolie 2022). The church consists of people of diverse ethnic groups, and when it time to choose church members for positions of leadership and power, there is also there is the Hausa-Fulani Muslim Population and Berom, Anaguta, and Afizere Christian groups in Jos, Plateau State (Uche, 2023), the Boko Haram Islamic sect is tied to the Northern part of Nigeria (Abdul 2018). National leaders profess commitment to national integration at all levels, but the citizens seem not to see the practicality of leaders' profession. Christians are part of the problem.

The Nigerian Government and organisations are not folding their arms to these conflict situations. Some of the solutions proffered are community policing (Ibrahim-Olesin, et al., 2024), Judicial Separation (Aidonojie, et al, 2022), religious education (Abodunrin, Ogungbenro and Adegbenro, 2024), peace journalism (Nsude, 2016) and

cordial kinship relations (Lateju, Ajani and Ayuba, 2023) among others. The measures are not working.

It is disheartening to note that these conflicts find their way into the church. It leads to violence, killing and litigations at times. Many issues are not easily resolved, and this brings disrepute to the Church. There is indeed the need for alternative dispute resolution, which Matthew 18: 15 -17 poses to offer.

### Historico-Grammatical Analysis of Matthew 18:15-17.

#### The Text

<sup>15</sup>Εάν δὲ ἀμαρτήσῃς τὸ ἀδελφόν σου, ἔρχου καὶ ἀπαγγέλον αὐτὸν μετὰ ἑσέ, καὶ ἀκούσῃ, ἐκέρδησας τὸν ἀδελφόν σου ·

<sup>16</sup>εἰ δὲ μὴ ἀκούσῃ, παράλαβε μετὰ σοῦ ἑτι ἕνα ἢ δύο, ἵνα ἐπὶ στόματος δύο μαρτύρων ἢ τριῶν σταθῇ πᾶν ῥῆμα ·

<sup>17</sup>εἰ δὲ ἀκούσῃ αὐτῶν, εἰπὸν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ · ἐάν δὲ καὶ τῆς ἐκκλησίας παρακούσῃ, ἔστω σοι ὡς πρὸς ἔθνη καὶ ὡς πρὸς τελώνης.

#### The Translation

<sup>15</sup>your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private. If he listens to you, you have won your brother.

<sup>16</sup>But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses, every fact may be confirmed.

<sup>17</sup>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.

#### The Context of Matthew 18: 15-17

The author of the gospel of Matthew is anonymous although the Church from the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century generally ascribed it to Matthew, the Apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ (McCain 2005; Ayegboyin, 2015; Matthew 9:9; 10:3, Mark 3:18, Acts 1:13). The Gospel was written to and for Jewish Christians living in Antioch of Syria to strengthen their faith in Jesus as the promised Christ (Messiah) in the Old Testament. It was written for the Christians in Palestine and the converted and unconverted Gentiles (McCain 2005; Ayegboyin, 2015).

The author was aware that in the Old Testament, and among the Jews there were various ways of handling conflicts. Firstly, the Mosaic Law allows the principle of *lex talionis*, “tit for tat” (Exodus 21:24, 25ff and Leviticus 24:20) allows people to perpetrate the same measure of evil that was done to them “a hand for a hand”, “a tooth for a tooth”, “wound for wound”, and “stripe for stripe” (Oyekan, 2020). There is also the principle of collective retribution (Gen 6:5-8, 19: 4; 2 Kings 17:7-8 Deut. 11:13-15), individual retribution as exemplified in Gen. 19: 15-26; Num. 12:1-10; 2 Sam. 6:6-77; Exod. 32:33, 21:14 (Ausloos, 2023). Secondly, the Cities of Refuge as described in Exodus 35:9-34, aim at resolving conflict, violence and bloodshed. This is also in feature in the African context whereby once an offender can run and hold an elderly person, the offended should not harm or touch the offender until the offender leaves the elderly. Most times the elderly resolve the matter and avoid violence. Thirdly, there is the guideline for the compensation model in Exodus 21:18-27 and 22:5 (Ugwu and Eze, 2023). Fourthly, Deut. 19: 15-21 would not allow the passing of any judgement, until guilt and innocence has been established.

In the New Testament, there were series of disputes, between the Libertines, Cyrenians, the Alexandrians against Stephen ( Acts 6:9), Jesus and the religious leaders (Luke 13:10-17), between the apostles (Acts 15: 36-41, Gal. 2:11-14) and between the early believers (Acts 6). The synagogues, apart from being a place of worship also served as a place for the administration of justice and many disputes were settled in the dispute by the elders (Boaheng, 2021: cf. John 9:22-34; 2 Cor. 11:24). The early believers used the Jerusalem Council (e. g Acts 15) to resolve conflicts.

In Matthew 18:1-14 Jesus teaches his disciples about who would be greatest in the Kingdom of God. Hence, the disciples were still puzzled about whether Jesus would or had chosen among them (Aland, 1993). Jesus emphasized the significance of childlikeness, which epitomizes humility. He did this by practically calling up and pointing to a child in their midst as the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. As a paradigm, Jesus calls to mind the love and care a shepherd demonstrates by leaving “ninety-nine” sheep searching for one lost sheep and the joy expressed when he finds it. This He taught to illustrate the love of His Father, who does not desire that any of these little ones should be lost nor perish, and springing from this background, Jesus instituted the procedure for reinstating an offending brother. It has to be implicit in the luminosity of reinstatement and not sentence.

The dialogue regarding the forgiveness of one’s offending brother ensued between Peter and Jesus immediately after the restoration of the same in Matthew 18:15-20. Peter initiated this dialogue with an inquiry: “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me,

and I forgive him? Seven times?” Jesus told him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven- (18:21).”

Bauer et. al. (1964) asserted that “Peter understood the position of some Jewish Rabbis who maintained that the conventional cut-off point in matters of forgiveness is three times; hence, he suggested seven times as if to look more acceptable to Jesus,” (54), but Jesus’ reply suggested an infinite number hence, the centrality of forgiveness in the habitual lives of His disciples.

### **Structural and Syntactical Analysis of Matthew 18:15-17**

The text portrays threestages of Community Discipline (18:15-17) and alternates between conditional clauses (with *ἐάν* followed by the aorist subjunctive) and consequences, expressed by imperatives (Thompson 1970). The dependent clauses present hypothetical confrontation situations (18:15a, 16a, 17a, 17c). Each is immediately followed by an imperative that enjoins an appropriate response (18:15, 16b, 17b, 17d). This pattern is broken twice, first in 18:15c-d, which describes a hypothetical positive response and resulting reconciliation. This positive response/reconciliation is possible at later confrontation steps and is implicit after 18:16c, 17b, and possibly even 17d. The only other interruption is in 18:16c, where scriptural support for two or three witnesses (cf. 18:19-20) in the second step is added (Luz 2001).

### **Hypothetical initial offense (v. 15)**

Enshrined within the immediate context is an added imperative structural key for comprehending Matthew 18:15-17. With the phrase: “Truly I say to you” (*ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν*), Jesus began His discourse in 18:3 and reiterated the same in 18:18 to institute the pericope of the text under consideration. It is observable that this discursive instrument, which Jesus generally and recurrently utilized more often than not, denoted an alteration in the subject matter of discourse as it is notable to have transpired after the restoration process in 18:15-17 and then the successive introduction and conferment of exclusive authority and empowerment of the disciples in particular and Church in general (18:18-20).

Considering its grammatical and syntactical sources, the phrase “the brother of you (*ὁ ἀδελφός σου*)” as used in 18:15 consists of a singular noun and pronoun as well as a singular imperative verb “go (*ὑπάγε*)” which portrays a state of affairs involving an individual with another which requires no third party at its initial stage and which is emphasized by the qualifying phrase “between you and him alone (*μεταξὺ σοῦ καὶ αὐτοῦ μόνου*)” and if the brother hears you and is won then, the matter needs no further stretched out debate as the purpose of this dialogue – the restoration of the lost sheep has been achieved hence, the expression of joy.

The warnings against despising a fellow disciple or causing them to fall into sin inform the procedure here (18:6, 10; Cf. 5:22–24). The first step of confrontation is a conversation between two individuals. This intramural emphasis and Peter’s question in 18:21 render the disputed words “against you” in 18:15 plausibly authentic despite their absence in many early MSS (cf. Davies and Allison, 1991). As the shepherd rescued the straying sheep, the offended person must take the initiative to reconcile with the offender (18:12, 15). Bitterness and gossip are inappropriate (cf. Prov. 25:9–10). The primary duty of the offended person is expressed by ἔλεγχον, which refers to rebuke that is based on evidence and attempts to persuade the offender of having sinned and to lead toward reconciliation (cf. Lev. 19:17 LXX; W. Thompson 1970: 178)—the three stages of confrontation that begin here involving more community members successively. Ideally, the sin of one against another can be reconciled between the two of them (Matt. 18:15; Cf. Lev. 19:17–18; Prov. 3:12; 25:9–10; 27:5–6).

### **A hypothetical negative response to personal confrontation (v. 16)**

A positive response is envisioned in 18:15, but if the offender disobeys the private personal rebuke, the second step is to bring in one or two other disciples to back up the offended person. This is calculated to underline the problem’s gravity and add their wisdom to its solution (18:16). Deuteronomy 19:15 supports this procedure. If this rebuke by a small group of peers cannot resolve the matter, it must be taken before the entire local community, the “church” (cf. Matt. 16:18).

Knowing the deviant nature of man, Jesus set up another phase of the process: “Take with you one or two (παράλαβε μετὰ σοῦ ἕτι ἓνα ἢ δύο,)” maintaining the singular imperative verb and pronoun which is to be engaged exclusively by the initiator of the initial phase. It is to validate or credibility that one or two others are to be involved in this phase of the matter and are, therefore, not the predominant figures in the issue. The goal of this step and its implication is the same as the primary step; however, if the offending brother still refuses to hear/listen, Jesus said the initiator himself, as suggested by the aorist active imperative, second person singular “εἰπέ” should take the third step by telling the matter to the Church by this, the Church is drawn in vocally in the mutation process. Although the Church is not here designated as an imperative second or third person, the top-notch result is that the offending brother will hear or listen to the Church. The goal here is the same as the earlier steps; however, if otherwise, then the meeting of a seeming downbeat effect: “He is to be to you (ἔστω σοι) as the Gentile and the tax collector.” It should be noted in this phrase that the parties here are in the singular and concern the offending and the offended brothers and have no possible reference to the Church.



Concerning the “binding and loosing” as stated in 18:18, it would be recalled that Jesus had beforehand declared heralded: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (16:19) and here reiterated part of that assertion in 18:18 as He here addressed the disciples in a pluralistic denotation. A careful and perceptible study would reveal a pale but imperative alteration from the singular uses in 18:15-17 to the plural uses in 18:18-20 which essentially denotes a universally valid code accredited in 18:15-17, and a more constricted prime application premeditated for the disciples as stated in 18:18-20. Concisely, 18:15-17 implies that the Church can stick to the patently outlined guiding principles while 18:18-20 confers a unique mandate and empowerment on the disciples.

From its lexical sources, the resolution and restoration principles and procedures in Matthew 18:15-17 are occasioned by a condition: “If your brother sins against you.” The verb ‘sins’ (ἁμαρτήση) as used in 18:15 connotes a transgressing or doing of wrong (Bauer et al., 1964). “While the subject/recipient of the crime is not perceptible in some literature, the preponderant text inserts the object (εἰς ἑ) and that if the earlier analysis is favoured, the occasion could include not only a direct but any offence the initiator is aware” (Bauer et al., 1964).

Delineating the text under consideration, Bauer et al. (1964) opined that the goal of the laid down procedure is to regain an erring brother whose expected responsibility is to “listen or hear (ἀκούση), which manifestly connotes more than straightforward auditory discernment and involves doing”.

### **A hypothetical negative response to peer confrontation (v. 17)**

Three increasingly grave rebukes provide the offender with every opportunity to acknowledge error. However, if the offender will not heed even the Church, there is no higher earthly court of appeal. The remaining action is to withdraw community fellowship and regard the offender as a Gentile and a tax collector, an outsider who cannot participate in the community’s activities. Nevertheless, Jesus treated notorious sinners compassionately (5:46-47; 9:10-13; 10:3), so absolute shunning or total withdrawal from personal contact is not necessarily commanded here (Garland 1993).

The labelling of the erring and unheeding brother as “tax collector (τελώνης)” by Jesus in 18:17 is deliberated to commune His stance on such a brother who should be pictured as one with a diverse curriculum than that of the assembly. It could further be insinuated that Matthew, a former tax collector with experiential knowledge, used the term “tax collector” to expose and employ the Jewish ethnic stigma against tax collectors

who were marked for their inequitable practices. A more derivable significance in this context can be decoded from Jesus' approach and dealings with tax collectors who, from Matthew's observation, were looked out for and did eat with Jesus and His disciples (9:9-10). In contrast, Jesus in this context was receptive as they approached Him with a teachable attitude. Therefore, the derivable lesson and inference from this context is that the erring and yet-to-listen brother should not be detested to the degree of discourtesy or callousness. Still, he should not be called for fellowship except for openness, a submissive and a scrutinized change of mind willing to hear and ready to be chastised.

The employment and application of the word gentile, ἔθνικὸς in 18:17 pose complicated due to ethnic nuances. However, the old King James adopted "heathen" to amputate any form of ethnic correlation to concentrate superlatively on spiritual repute. If translated as "heathen," then the erring, deviant, and unyielding brother is to be dealt with as an agnostic, though not with disrespect or unkindness. Jesus, in this context, was demonstrating to a community of cultured Jewish disciples with some entrenched cultural repugnance for non-Jews the nature of stigma connected with unrepentant members of the Church. It should be noted that Jesus was not promoting racial discrimination but rather the spirit of intolerance against an impenitent brother.

These three stages of confrontation ensure the fair treatment of both offending and offended individuals with as little fanfare as possible. Though church discipline is often taken lightly, it is an ominous matter, an aspect of doing God's will on earth as it is in heaven (6:10). Repeated rejection of the overtures of a fellow disciple, of two or three additional witnesses, and then of the entire community is tantamount to the rejection of Jesus and the Father.

### **Implications of Jesus' Model of Conflict Resolution Matthew 18:15-17.**

- I. Jesus encourages the offended to go and tell the offender his fault to win the offender. This is against the African cultural ethics that the offender should approach the offended. It is against human nature to their egocentrism. To Jesus, "Those who are well do not need a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17). The offended needs to move further by doing all he can to win the erring brother. African Christians should, therefore, debrief themselves on the cultural belief that the offender should be the one seeking peace and forgiveness of the offended.

- II. Jesus' model allows all parties involved to participate in the conflict resolution. This allows all parties to express their grievances and gives the mediators direction on the best way to handle the situation. This aligns with many African cultural ways of handling and resolving disputes. The saying, a gbéjónikandá, àgbàòsìkà among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria means, the one who refuses to allow all parties involved in conflict fair hearing is very wicked. Mediators need to understand that both the offended and the offenders must be pacified for a successful resolution of conflicts.
- III. Nigerian Christians should encourage negotiation and mediation in an attempt to resolve conflicts. The essence is to allow a mediator between the offended and the offender. There could be negotiations and giving up of self-interest.
- IV. Jesus' model resists all forms of compromise within the church. Christians should therefore allow the church of God to be the gathering of believers. They should condemn sternly, all forms of cheating and sin within the church. However, they should continue seeking to win the sinners to the Kingdom of God (Bora, 2023). They should never be careless to the point that they become like the sinners and gentiles within the Church.

## 6.o. Conclusion

Disputes/conflicts are damaging to the Church, mainly when mishandled. They hinder effective and dynamic leadership, ministry, good relationships, the practice of biblical doctrines and Christian discipline, and biblical and healthy church growth. Visions and goals are defeated, so the Church remains with no signs of proper advancement from Kingdom appraisal. Significant causes of dispute/conflict in the Church include power tussle over leadership positions, a phobia for a move towards change, misconception of true biblical doctrines and principles, and corroboration of personal interest, among others. Many, though members of the Church, are still knotted with their culture, which permits them to employ strategies and methods of conflict/dispute resolution other than the biblically proffered principle and procedure in Matthew 18:15-17. Jesus encourages private reconciliation. This study also advocates the application of Jesus' method as an appropriate approach for a win-win culmination that will foster a better relationship between disputing parties and unprecedented church growth. It disregards arrogance and pomposity, but encourages humility, love and restoration.

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