

Church Live Re-Visited: Session Five - Part 1

by Ron Bailey

Ron Bailey's sermon explores the church as a covenant community, emphasizing reconciliation and the importance of collective responsibility in addressing conflicts among believers.

Duration: 33:07

Scripture: Matthew 16:18, Matthew 18:15-20

Topics: "Church Discipline", "Covenant Community"

Description

This sermon delves into the concept of the church as a covenant community, emphasizing the importance of living in unity and reconciliation within the local church. It explores the process of church discipline outlined in Matthew 18, highlighting the steps to take when a member causes offense and refuses to be reconciled. The sermon also touches on the significance of binding and loosing in the context of church discipline, emphasizing God's endorsement of decisions made in alignment with His will.

Transcript

So we're going to study 1 Corinthians 5 tonight, and some of the implications that come from it. So we pray, Father we come to you again. Thank you Lord for this access that we have into your presence.

Thank you Lord that you have promised that you will not leave us without help. And that there's one who has come to guide us into all truth. And we look to you Lord and we pray that tonight you will help us, speak to us and heal us.

And that you'll open our hearts Lord to hear whatever it is you want to say to us. Give us understanding deep in our spirits of some of these issues tonight. We commit the time to you and we pray your blessing on us as we study together.

Amen. Amen. Alright, so we're going to go to 1 Corinthians chapter 5. But before we go there, we're going to go to Matthew.

And the reason for this I'll make plain as we go. Go first of all to Matthew chapter 16. I've got a kind of a theme that I want to sort of develop tonight.

Or the things I want to say are all kind of part of a theme. And the theme is this really. It's not the sort of language that maybe we use in our circles very much.

But it's this. The church, the church as the church of Jesus Christ is a covenant community. And a local church, that's to say a church is also a covenant community.

And part of the problem that was happening in Corinth is that they were not living, not discerning the covenant community. They were thinking in very individualistic terms. They were thinking of their own rights, their own gifts, all these things.

We've said this each time I think we've met together. But it begins almost with this introduction to the whole problem. That in Corinth, every one of you says Paul says I. Every one of you says I'm of Paul, I'm of Apollos, I'm of Cephas.

And so it goes on. And this fierce individuality which was distinctive of kind of Greece and Corinth in particular. Is something which has really undermined all kinds of other principles that ought to have been working in the church.

So this is the kind of theme that I want to kind of weave in and out of tonight. That the church is a covenant community. A church is not a bunch of individuals.

It's not a place where people come just to hone their own skills. Or to polish their own shining whiteness as Oswald Chambers would have said. It's a people who have been welded together in one spirit, baptised into one body.

So that God can do unique things with them that he could never do with just an individual. So let's go to Matthew then. And we'll see that in Matthew's gospel there are really two passages which refer to the church.

And these are the only passages like this in the gospels. You don't have any reference to the church in Mark, Luke or John. Not by name.

But in Matthew's gospel you have this famous passage in Matthew chapter 16. Where this is often called the confession at Caesarea in Philippi. From verse 13.

And it's an answer to this question of the Lord Jesus to the disciples. Verse 15. Whom do you say that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

And Jesus answered and said to him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed unto thee but my Father who is in heaven. And then he says this. And I say also unto thee that thou art Peter.

I'm concentrating or emphasising the thou's to make a contrast like that later on. Thou art Peter. And upon this rock I will build my church.

And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.

And whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loose in heaven. Then he charged his disciples that they should tell no men that he was Jesus the Christ. This is a reference to the universal church of Jesus Christ.

The church which is, I sometimes say is, it's vertically, it's kind of one church. That's to say it goes back to all the different generations. Paul was part of this church and so is everybody in between him and us.

And it goes horizontally. It includes all the people who are God's people throughout the whole wide world. And it continues in the vertical direction beyond us.

That's to say it will continue when we have gone to be with the Lord. It's an eternal concept. This is the eternal universal church of God.

And it has nothing at all to do with what little brand of church denomination you belong to. It has to do with people whose lives have been built upon who Jesus Christ is and what he is now. So it's right relationship with Jesus Christ.

It comes by revelation. As the Lord said to Peter, you're blessed Peter because it isn't flesh and blood who have revealed this to you but it's my Father. So it comes as a result of a direct revelation.

That's to say God speaks to us, we respond to that and ultimately God brings us in, makes us part of his church. And when you get into the New Testament there are some illustrations, some metaphors of the church which affect the local church and some that also kind of affect the universal church. So for example, and I think it's significant, a local church is never called the Bride of Christ.

The universal church is called the Bride of Christ. The universal church is called the Body of Christ and the local church is called the Body. And actually you as an individual are also a body if the Spirit of God dwells in you.

So there are some parts which are the same and some parts which are different. So that's the first reference to the church in Matthew and it's referring to the universal church. I think that when you get into the New Testament, the letter that deals most with the universal church of God, that's to say the entire church of God, is actually the letter to the Ephesians.

I don't think that most of what has been said in the Ephesian letter is primarily to the local church of Ephesus. I think it applies to the local church of Ephesus, but really I think it involves everybody. I won't go into all that now, but it has to do with those five-fold or four-fold ministries and other things.

If you turn to Matthew chapter 18, you'll discover that there's another reference to the church. It's Matthew chapter 18 and verse 15 where it says this, Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone. If he hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.

But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church. But if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and as a publican.

Now it's pretty clear, I think, if you think about it, that this reference to the church here can't possibly be referring to the universal church. Because there's no way that you can gather the universal church together to make a decision. Is that straightforward enough? This has to be dealing with not a universal church, but a local church.

It's a local expression of Christ in a particular place. And what it says here is, it's talking about a person who has offended someone else by his sin and then will not be reconciled. You can see here that it puts

the responsibility, in a sense, on the part of the person who has actually been offended.

And it says, for example, verse 15, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone. I'm tempted to pause on these things as we go through, because this is such a fundamental thing about the way in which Christians often live together. That if there is a cause of offense between two Christians, you go and you tell him alone.

You don't tell your wife, you don't tell the elders, you don't go and find out if anybody else has been offended in the same way as you do. If someone has offended you for any reason at all, you keep this, it's kind of almost like a damage limitation exercise, you keep this as small as it is possible. So that if ultimately, only if one person knows about it, that's you because you feel offended, and then you have to be sure that two people know about it, that's to say the person who has offended you knows about it.

And the whole purpose of this, according to the end of verse 15, please notice this, is not simply you win the argument. The end of verse 15 is, if he hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. So the whole point of this exercise is reconciliation.

It's not to find a winner and a loser. It's not to prove that this person was wrong and this person was right. It's not a court of law.

The whole purpose of this is to bring two people who have become separated by some event back together again. And this is really very significant in this passage of Scripture. One of the things that happens, because very often we read bits of Scripture, we don't relate it to the context.

We miss the context, and because we miss the context, sometimes we miss what is the most obvious interpretation of some of these passages. And the context here, I don't know if you've noticed this, in verse 12. Now how do you think, says Jesus, if a man has a hundred sheep and one of them be gone astray, does he not leave the ninety and nine and goes into the mountains and seeks that which is gone astray? If so be that he finds it truly, I say to you, he rejoices more of that sheep than of the ninety and nine which went not astray.

Even so, it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. Moreover, can you see that word? Moreover means as well as that, this. In other words, this is all part of a continual flow of something.

The picture here actually, and this is maybe something we should be reminded of as well and keep in our minds, but this picture of a shepherd actually seeking for a sheep that is lost has to do with discipline of church and not evangelism. And that might be a surprise to you, but this is a sheep we're looking for, not a goat. This is something which somehow has become separated from the covenant community.

It becomes separated from it and in some level, some level of consciousness by sin, by some act which someone is aware of and the effect of that is that there's a sense of separation which is developing. And then you've got this whole little process here which is designed to eliminate that, to put it right so that the two people are back together again. And you can see the kind of context it's dealing with because if we'd read through the whole of this and we came down to verse 21, I'm going to go back to the middle bit in a minute, but in verse 21 it says, Then came Peter, notice the word now, then.

In other words, this verse is connected with the verses before it, just as the moreover in verse 15 connected this section with what went before it. These are conjunctions, they're linked, they're not

disruptive. It's something that I think we really do have to remind ourselves all the time.

The Bible wasn't written in verses, it wasn't even written in chapters. And although chapters and verses can be very useful to enable us to identify a passage so that we can go straight to it, actually very often they're not helpful at all because they break things up into watertight compartments which ought to actually have been seamless. This is a whole process of things here.

It's talking about things which have become lost. And one of the things that becomes lost is if someone sins against another person, loss occurs. And it's the responsibility of someone to go and seek the person who has lost.

You go and you see and you tell him what it is that's caused this kind of sense of separation. And the amazing thing is that sometimes you don't even know that this sort of sense of separation has actually happened. I can remember, this is kind of years and years ago now, we lived in a big house in Birmingham.

And it was three floors in this house. And my study was right at the top, sort of in the eaves of the house. And on this particular occasion, Margaret was downstairs.

Because it was such a long way, we actually had an intercom connecting the downstairs kitchen to where I was at the top. And I was working away there doing something, obviously something of great importance. And the intercom kind of buzzed that it was Margaret.

And she wanted something like, do you know where you put the car keys or something like that. And I said, no, I don't. And I'm busy.

I'm doing important things up here. She said, oh, I'm sorry, it's fine. So she put the phone down.

So I went back to try and kind of give attention to my important things that I was doing. And of course, I just couldn't give any attention to them at all, because I knew that I'd behaved wrongly. So I was conscious of actually having sinned against her.

So in the end, I went downstairs and said, I'm sorry, love, I shouldn't have behaved like that. She said, I didn't think any more of it. And she had not been conscious of the separation.

I had been conscious of the separation. But putting the thing right healed the separation. And sometimes, when there has been a sin, a cause of offence or whatever it is, a cause of offence means something that makes your brother stumble.

Quite often when that happens, one of these two parties doesn't know it's happened. Sometimes the person intended to do something unkind, and this person is so dumb they didn't even notice it. And sometimes this person is so sensitive that this person did something which was never intended to be offensive at all, but this person really gets hurt about it.

And people are like that. But the person who knows is the person who has the responsibility to do something about it. So if you know that your brother has something against you, it's your responsibility to leave your sacrifice by the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother, and then come back and make the offer.

But if the person is offended against you, and that person isn't aware of it, and you are aware of it, then the book stops in your court. And it's your responsibility to take the initiative in putting these things out. What happens is, very often, we kind of sit on our high horses.

We say, it's for them to make the first move. After all, he's an elder, or he's somebody. He should know better than them.

But the point is, whoever knows is the person who has the responsibility. So here you've got a situation where, in verse 15, your brother has sinned against you, and you go and you tell him alone. You go.

If at all possible, don't phone them, don't write to them, go. Make eye contact with this person whose behaviour has offended you in some way. If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.

And like I was saying, that's the whole focus of this exercise, reconciliation. But what happens if he won't be reconciled? What happens if he wants to say, well, I stand here and you stand here, and no, I'm not satisfied with this? Well, this is what happens then in verse 16. If he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more.

That in the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word may be established. Now, I want to make the point that the first stage of this was in order to effect reconciliation. And the second stage of this is also to effect reconciliation.

But this time you're taking witnesses with you. You're not taking people who share your opinion. You're not taking people who will most likely side with you against this other person.

You're simply taking two or three neutral, as objective as they can be, witnesses to witness your next attempt to be reconciled with this person. Okay, then if that doesn't work, if the person is obviously determined not to be reconciled, what do you do about it? Well, you go on to verse 17. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it to the church.

But if he neglect to hear the church, so apparently you've now got some kind of meeting where this person who caused the offence in the first place is now actually brought into a church meeting. Not an elders' meeting. Tell the church.

This is real kind of high-risk strategy, this. I mean, you think about this, this could really go very badly wrong. But the whole thing about this is that this covenant community, although you try to restrict the damage it's caused by telling as few people as possible, when the thing does become public, it does become public.

And these things are not dealt with behind closed doors. These things are then dealt with very publicly. And in a public meeting, I'm not saying that we should implement every part of this kind of by the line.

I'm just saying there are really vital principles in here that we do well to kind of take notice of and see if we can work them out at some point later on. Well, so you then tell it to the church. And you are still endeavouring to effect reconciliation.

Now, if you won't hear the church, if you won't hear everyone pleading for reconciliation, then it says in the last half of verse 17, then let him be unto thee as an heathen man and as a tax-gatherer. Now, the significance of a heathen man, this is the word Gentile, or it's actually the adjective that comes from

Gentile. So it's let him be unto you like a Gentile.

Gentile-ish. Now, what is the significance of talking about Gentiles in this kind of context? Well, the significance is that a Gentile was someone who was outside the covenant community. That's really almost the definition of a Gentile.

He is someone who is outside the covenant community. Inside the covenant community, there are privileges and there are responsibilities. And if a person ultimately will not embrace, will not shoulder, the responsibilities of being part of this covenant community, the last sanction that the covenant community has is to actually put this person outside the covenant community so that this person now no longer shares any of the privileges.

If he won't have the responsibilities, he can't have the privileges either. So ultimately, with this person, you treat him as though he's not part of the family. He's not part of the family he's got.

He's not part of this community. It's interesting. We'll see a link with this in Corinthians in a minute.

It's interesting that the early Christians looked upon themselves as God's new Israel, God's new covenant people. And at different times, you'll see references which may be not what you think they're referring to at first glance. For example, in John's third letter, he makes a reference to certain people and he commends them and he recommends them, their ministry and who they are to certain people.

And then he uses this little phrase and he says, because they went out and they didn't take anything from the Gentiles. Now, what does John mean when he says that? Does that mean that John is speaking as a Jew and writing to Jews? No, he isn't. He's actually writing to the Christian community.

And what he's saying is that this person has not depended in any way on external resources or supplies. This person hasn't had any help from anybody else other than the covenant community. So, what he's saying is he hasn't taken anything from the Gentiles.

So, sometimes when the Bible uses the word Gentile, we need to be alert to it. It might not be thinking in terms of Jew and non-Jew. It may be thinking in terms of Christian and non-Christian.

This whole kind of theme of the covenant community. And we'll see, I hope, the way it develops in a minute or two. Let's go, while we're still in chapter 18, let's look at this passage from verse 17.

No, sorry, from verse 18. Now, remember that we're in the context of trying to effect a reconciliation. And it's failed at every single level.

Now, if that happens at every single level, you're to regard this person as though he was a Gentile, as though he was a tax gatherer, someone absolutely outside your circle. And then in verse 18 it says this. Verily, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Is that familiar? That's exactly the same thing that we read that Jesus said to Peter. What thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven. So now we're talking about the church, the local church.

Not just that that is the special care of the apostles, but we're talking about a local church now. And it says here that what you shall bind on earth, that shall be bound in heaven. What it's saying is this, is that if the spirit of all these things are done in a proper way, God will actually endorse the actions and the decisions

of the local church.

This is really going to be a key thing. If things are done in the way that they're supposed to be done, God will endorse the actions of the local church. It's obvious that no individual can really put someone outside the covenant community.

Only God can do that. But if the church comes to the conclusion that there's no other way, there's no, the final sanction against this person who will not be reconciled is that he must be removed from the covenant community, now God will endorse this decision of the local church. It says in the Acts of the Apostles, I'm sorry, in the end of Mark, that they went out preaching the word and God confirmed the word by signs following.

What it's saying here is that God will confirm the decisions if they're taken in the right way of the local church as regards binding and loosening. Now this may really come as a surprise and a bit of a shock if you've not thought about this. But there's a whole theology which has developed over the years concerning binding and loosing, concerning binding spirits and loosing spirits and loosing this person from that problem and loosing this person from that heredity and loosing them from this, that and the other.

And then on the other hand, binding the spirits of Islam or the spirits of Hinduism or the spirits... These verses have nothing at all to do with such things. These verses have to do with discipline in the local church. Look at the context.

These verses have to do with discipline in the local church. We go on to verse 19. Again I say to you that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven.

We are still in the same church discipline context here. So all the times we've quoted these things about if two or three agree, it shall be done. If this is the verse we've had in our minds, maybe we need to re-examine it.

I'm not saying that God would cancel out any of those prayers because you've got the theology wrong. God understands our hearts. He knows what we're doing.

But the point I want to make is this. Is that this passage of Scripture has to do with the fact that if in a group of people there is absolute unanimity and these people have done things in the right way... Let me make this point again because it will come out a little bit later when we actually get to 1 Corinthians chapter 5. That this person is not being excluded from the covenant community because he's become an irritation. He's not being excluded because the elders don't get on with him.

He's not being excluded because he doesn't actually believe all the doctrinal points of the particular community, his local community. He is being excluded because he will not be reconciled to the covenant community. That's why he's being excluded.

Can we see that? Really, excommunication really is, it's the ultimate and it's the final sanction. It's not to be used as some kind of big stick to keep people in line. I have known churches where their church discipline is very much to make people just kind of tow the party line.

To make sure they don't kind of cause a bit of a rock and boat. They don't do this, that, the other. Everybody kind of stays nice and neat and does as they're told.

This here, where it's referring to two or three, a green picture, it is talking about prayer. It is talking about, but it isn't talking about, it's talking about prayer which is almost prophetic prayer. Give us some of the name of that.

It's talking about the kind of prayer which is not just a desire. It's the kind of prayer in which the two or three people who are united in this, if that's what that local assembly is. These two people agree as touching this thing and they loose this person.

They loose them from the covenant community. If they do that in prayer, God conscious, and we'll see the implications of that in a minute too, God will endorse this and the effect will be that that person will be separated from the covenant community. And I'll show you what some of the implications of that are in a minute.

I'm not saying we shouldn't agree when we pray. Obviously that isn't what I'm saying. I'm just saying that this verse is not about general agreement in prayer.

This verse is particularly about church discipline. Now verse 20, as if we haven't had enough trouble, here's verse 20, how about this one? For where two or three have been gathered together into my name, there I am in the midst of them. This is what constitutionally might be called a constitutionally convened meeting.

But it isn't because you've gone through the minutes of what is the order of your particular group. It's because you've done something in the right order. This gathering gathers under the authority of Jesus Christ, that's verse 20.

Where two or three are gathered together in my name, that's to say this is a company of people who have come together and are conscious of Jesus Christ's lordship. They've not gathered together to work out the procedure as to how they can deal with this or that or the other. They've gathered together there before God.

So if you like, they're waiting on God. This whole pattern here is of this church, whether it's two or three or more than that, they're waiting upon God. And they have to come to a place of absolute unanimity.

Two or three of them, this won't do. If this doesn't have full unanimity, then it can't work in this way. And then it goes on to say, where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.

OK, before we leave Matthew and actually get to Mark 5, let's just kind of go on a little bit to verse 21 and see the context. And you'll see that Peter is still on the same subject. He hasn't switched on to the topic of prayer or spiritual warfare or any of these things.

He knows what all this is about. Verse 21, Then came Peter to him and said, Lord, how often shall my brothers sin against me, and I forgive you? Until seven times. And Jesus says to him, I say not unto thee until seven times, but until seventy times seven.

OK, I'm going to pause for five minutes or so.

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