

Question: "How should Christians handle disputes (Matthew 18:15-17)?"

Answer: Christians have often turned to the principles of Matthew 18 for guidance in handling disputes. There Jesus says, "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (verses 15-17). From these verses, several guidelines can be found for resolving conflicts between Christians.

First, a Christian who has a conflict with another Christian is called to address the matter with the other person personally. When matters are handled privately, misunderstanding can be addressed, and there is great potential for the other person to respond positively. In addition, a private meeting helps to avoid the problem of gossip that can occur when a matter is taken to others instead of the person involved.

Second, if a private discussion does not solve the issue, a Christian is to take one or two other believers and meet with the person with whom they have conflict. The clause "that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" refers to the Old Testament law that required a charge to be supported by two or more witnesses to be valid. In the case of personal conflict, this principle allows for additional witnesses to observe the matter firsthand and help determine the proper course of action.

Third, when there is no resolution after steps one and two, the matter is to be taken before the local church. Only in rare cases will a Christian seeking to follow the Lord refuse to resolve conflict when the entire congregation is involved.

Finally, if the person in the center of the conflict refuses to respond positively even when the entire congregation is involved, then that person is to be considered as "a pagan or a tax collector." This simply means to excommunicate the person, removing the negative influence from the congregation.

In 1 Corinthians 5, the apostle Paul speaks of a believer who had been sexually immoral, apparently with his stepmother. Rather than condemning the act, the Corinthian Christians had tolerated the behavior. Paul taught they should remove this person from their church family (1 Corinthians 5:3). Later, in 2 Corinthians, this same person had turned from this lifestyle, and Paul advised the Corinthian believers to accept him again. The goal of discipline is not to be mean or cold-hearted but to condemn sinful behavior and issue a call to change. In 2 Corinthians 2:8, Paul writes, "I beg you to reaffirm your love for him" (ESV).

Christians are called to handle disputes in love, with a goal of restoration. Conflict should be handled according to the steps listed in Matthew 18. This style of conflict resolution is based on a desire for holy living and love for the person who has committed wrong.

*taken from www.gotquestions.org