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"TREAT HIM LIKE A TAX COLLECTOR" MATT 18,17: A CHRISTIAN'S RESPONSE TO SOCIO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS.

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Abstract
The history of the world has remained a history of peace of escape and uneasy calm. No one is sure of tomorrow. Nigeria is not an exception. Nigerians are anxious about the future of their nation sequent to the menace and threats from radical Islam under the common term, "Fulanization". It is the belief of an average Nigerian that there are perilous plans to Islamize Nigeria by force; a concern heightened by the recent invasion of the Christian dominated Eastern part by Fulani herdsmen. In our local Church, the story is not even different. These days, priests are attacked. Rectories and Churches are burgled. Many parishes are in tumult. There are doctrinal and pastoral problems ad intra and ad extra. Over and above the menace of incessant division in Christendom, leading to Catholicism, Protestantism and Pentecostalism, the perilous advances and growth of the so-called traditional religion adherents especially among the youths remain a matter of grave concern. Prayer mongers claiming special divine call and gift seem to eat up the veracity of the gospel of Christ. The uneasy calm created by these are too obvious to be neglected. This paper believes that Matt 18,17 offers us a solution in order to have peace of conquest without conflict. It focuses on the worrisome conflict caused by religious extremists in Nigeria and then posits tolerance and forgiveness as solution to the avoidable conflicts in Nigeria engineered by these extremisms and exaggerated stories. It employs exegetical lens to interpret Matt 18,17 from the backdrop of historical facts to project it as a solution to resolution of conflicts especially in the face of dangers posed by the great divide of credal walls. The result of the research if adopted by all is restoration of peace and stability in our local Church and Nigeria at large.

KEY WORDS: **Tax Collector, Conflict Resolution, Christianity, Intolerance, Extremism.**

INTRODUCTION

Comprehension of some biblical texts are as challenging as they seem inconsistent with what one considers the general tenet of the scriptures especially the New Testament. Matt 18,17 is one of those texts. The text is even more taunting and problematic because just few verses later, Jesus replied to Peter that one must forgive seventy-seven times (Matt 18,22). Jesus frequently taught about forgiveness. He departed from the tit-for-tat provision of the Old Testament and the rabbinic teaching that one forgives three times (3x) to insist that one must forgive as often as one is offended (Matt 18,22). He even gave it as a condition for one to be forgiven by God (Matt 6,14-15). It is also a *conditio sine qua non* for answered prayer (Mark 11,23-25). He expressed it as the key to our relationship with God (Luke 11,4). He did not just teach it. He practised and demonstrated it while on earth. One can see this in: the paralytic lowered on a mat through the roof (Matt 9,2-8); the woman caught in adultery (John 8,3-11); the woman who anointed his feet with oil (Luke 7,47-50); Peter for denying he knew Jesus (John 18,15-18.25-27; 21,15-19; the criminal on the cross Luke 23,39-43; the people who crucified him Luke 23,34). Other New Testament writers maintained the same idea that we should always forgive (Eph 4,26-32; Col 3,12-13). The big problem is to understand why Jesus would teach his followers to treat one as a tax collector if he has consistently taught them to forgive very often. It is possible that the text is

influenced by social situation where it was written. Probably, some members of his community became so intransigent and troublesome that excommunication was considered the last option. It is also possible that the author/redactors got the text from a source and just inserted it forgetting what he wrote in other passages. That the text is a teaching on social control and settlement of cases between members is still another probability. It is too early for this paper to take a position. Saldarini (1994) observes that the gospel of Matt is a complex text and the most Jewish of all gospels because it refers in a sustained and serious way to the bible, to specific Jewish customs and beliefs, and to the general Jewish cultural and religious thought world of the first century. The author considers himself to be a Jew who has the true interpretation of Torah and is faithful to God's will as revealed by Jesus, whom he declares to be the Messiah and Son of God. Matthew promotes a perfected or fulfilled Judaism brought to its goal by the long-awaited Christ (Hagner, 1985). He seeks to promote his interpretation of Judaism over that of other Jewish leaders, especially those of emerging rabbinic Judaism. Thus, even in speaking of Jesus, Matthew still maintains his link with Judaism though at its far edges. This does not imply that the gospel of Matthew is a Jewish work. Since it was read and preserved by the second century Christian community and later became part of the New Testament collection, it is assumed to be a Christian writing and thus not a Jewish work. It must still be noted that by first century, many groups of believers-in-Jesus were either integral parts of the Jewish community or not yet completely separated from Judaism. As at the time of the gospel, the boundaries between Jewish communities and the Christian groups was porous and indistinct. To study Matthew as a Christian clearly separate from Judaism as independent religion "contradicts the complex and overlapping relationships among varieties of Jews, including some groups who believed in Jesus" (Saldarini 1994:11). It is therefore the submission of this paper that an understanding of Matt 18,17 must consider the people's understanding of a tax collector in the time of the writing of the gospel of Matthew. A study of the gospel as of Hellenistic-Jewish Christian mission will also help unravel the mystery behind the meaning of the text. The nature of the Matthew's community at the time of the writing of the gospel will surely give a good background to why the author maintains his position in Matt 18,17. These and other issues including textual problems and analysis of the basic concepts are the major considerations of this paper.

TAX COLLECTOR: AN EXCURSUS

During the time of Jesus, Israel was divided into various territories that were governed by the descendants of Herod the Great, but Judea was an Imperial territory governed by a Roman procurator and the ***taxes*** were very high there. Wealthy Jews would bid for the position of tax collector and get even more rich by adding a substantial fee above whatever was owed.

There is no one hated by a nation quite as much as an enemy collaborator. The tax collectors in Israel at the time of Christ were the leaches that sucked the financial blood out of the hard-working laborers of Israeli society and transferred it into the coffers of the occupying Roman Empire, taking as much as they could for themselves. They were never popular especially in the first Century C.E among the Jews residing in Galilee and Judea. The tax collector made a sizable living. But part of his pay was the derision, disgust and isolation of his community. In rigid defiance he plodded through the condemning faces, the whispers, the threats and rage, multiplying his wealth and the emptiness of his soul. The Jews so resented taxation by the Roman authority such that additional taxes erupted rebellion. Example is the uprising referenced in Acts 5,37 about Judas the Galilean. The Jews saw payment of taxes as subjection to foreign powers and rendering Jewish nation a vassal state.

Apart from subjection to a foreign power, the Jews also disdained and hated payment of taxes and tax collectors because of the system with which taxes were collected and the resultant abuses. Imperial officers were responsible for collecting polls and taxes. Authority to collect taxes on exports, imports and mercantile taken through a country was by highest bidder system on public auction. In this case, the rich usually got the authority as highest bidders. They were known as publicans. In their collection of taxes, they made profit that often exceeded the amount of their bid. Again, they always subleted part of their territory to subcontractors to collect taxes. The subcontractors, in turn, were in charge of other men who personally collected the taxes. Zacchaeus, for example, appears to have been the chief over the tax collectors in and around Jericho. (Luke 19,1-2) And Matthew, whom Jesus called to be an

apostle, was one who did the actual work of collecting taxes. Matthew, also known as Levi, apparently had his tax office in or near Capernaum (Matt. 10,3; Mark 2,1.14).

A tariff decree of Palmyra dating from 137 C.E. illustrates some of the abuses to which the tax system was subject. Its preamble states that in earlier (first century) times the rate of tax was not fixed. Charges were made by custom, often according to the whim of the tax collector. This frequently gave rise to disputes. The disputes were because of the dishonesty of the tax collectors. They were understood as having dubious moral qualities. They were seen as extortioners putting fictitious tax values on goods and then offering to lend money (with high interest rates) to those unable to pay. With stick in hand, and brass plate displayed prominently on their chest, they would stop caravans and demand that everything be tumbled out upon the ground for inspection. Thereafter they would take whatever suited them, frequently leading away the well-fed beasts of burden and substituting inferior ones. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Jewish tax collectors were held in low esteem. They, being in the service of a foreign power, Rome, and in close contact with "unclean" Gentiles, their very presence was resented. The other Jews generally avoided voluntary association with them. (Matt 18,17) Tax collectors were classified with persons known to be sinners, including harlots. (Matt 9,11; 11,19; 21,32; Mark 2,15; Luke 5,30; 7,34) To cheat a tax collector was not considered a sin among the Jews. The Talmud classified tax collectors with murderers and robbers, and their gains as acquired by deceit and violence, unfit even to be accepted for charity.

In conclusion, the tax collectors were seen as disloyal Israelites hired by the Romans to tax other Jews for personal profit. They became symbols for the worst kind of people (Matt 9,10.11; 11,19; 18,17; 21,31; Mark 2,14-16; Luke 5,30; 7,25.29.34; 18,11-13).

REASONS WHY TAX COLLECTORS WERE HATED

Our study of the historical excursus into the collection of taxes in the time of Christ and the views of most NT authors about tax collectors, the researcher deduces there are reasons for the low view of tax collectors in the NT.

The first reason is that no one likes to pay taxes especially if there is no clear-cut evidence of accountability of the tax payers' money. It is even worse if the government is oppressive like the Roman Empire of the first century C.E. The natural tendency is to transfer the aggression against the agents used by the government in collecting the taxes.

In the bible, the Romans were seen as colonial masters by the Jews. Thus, the Jews used by them to extort taxes from their fellow Jews were seen as traitors to their own countrymen. Rather than joining hands with the other Jews to fight the Romans, they became agents of extortion used by the Roman oppressors and even enriched themselves at the expense of their fellow Jews.

Their gross dishonesty and cheating by hook or by crook made them odiously repugnant. Everyone believed that every tax collector was a cheat making dishonest gains. In Luke 19,8 Zacchaeus confessed his past dishonesty.

The Jews also hated paying taxes because part of the money went to maintain the pagan temples and to finance the luxurious lifestyles of Rome's upper class. Payment of taxes was therefore interpreted as participation in idolatry.

The tax collectors were rich people and so separated from lower classes who repudiated them. The ostracism they faced amongst their own people made them form their own clique leading to further separation from the rest of the society.

MATTHEW AS A MAN OF HELLENISTIC-JEWISH CHRISTIAN MISSION

Most gospels originally circulated anonymously including the gospel of Matthew. Its ascription to Matthew is on the hope that having an apostle and eyewitness as the author will add to its authenticity and credibility. Perrin (1974) indicates that "the fact the gospel makes very extensive use of the gospel of Mark, building on it as a foundation, makes it impossible that it should have been written by a disciple and eyewitness" (p. 169). The author reveals himself to be a man who stands in the Hellenistic Jewish Christian mission tradition. His gospel undoubtedly is climaxed by the Mandatum Magnum of Matt 28,19 (poreuthentes oun mathēteusate panta ta ethnē) yet his concern tends to focus sharply on the

mission of the church to the Jews. He develops his understanding of the tenets of Christianity but with constant dialogue with the proceedings in Judaism of the time.
Possibly, the gospel was written at a time of shattered hopes for the Jews – Jerusalem and its Temple were destroyed by the Romans during the Roman/Jewish war. The experience was like a dwindling of hope for both the Jews and Christians. For the Jews, it implied a termination of the Temple worship and a closure of the door to knowing God in the world. The pilgrimage centre and place of Passover was gone. The experience resulted in a shift of power and influence among the various active sects in Judaism before the war, namely, the pharisees, Sadducees and Zealots.
The pharisees (Matt 5,20; 23,1-36; Luke 6,2; 7,36-47) are a strict group of religious Jews who advocated minute obedience to the Jewish law and traditions. They have respect for the law, belief in the resurrection of the dead and committed to obeying God's will. They practised different forms of pieties like payment of tithes, synagogue attendance, prayer and almsgiving. They studied and interpreted the Law. They rejected Jesus claim to be Messiah because he did not follow all their traditions and associated with notoriously wicked people.
The Sadducees (Matt 3,7; 16,11-12; Mark 12,18) are the wealthy aristocrats, upper class, Jewish priestly party. They were ardent politicians. They organized the Jewish state under the leadership of a High Priest. They compromised their Jewishness and accepted the ultimate authority of the Roman rule. They rejected the authority of the Bible beyond the five books of Moses. They profited so much from business in the Temple. Along with the Pharisees, they formed the two major parties of the Jewish council. They showed great respect for the five books of Moses as well as the sanctity of the Temple. They denied the resurrection of the dead. They thought that the Temple could also be used as a place to transact business.

The Zealots (Luke 6,15; Acts 1,14) are a fiercely dedicated group of Jewish patriots determined to end Roman rule in Israel. They were violent revolutionaries who were concerned about the future of Israel. They were prepared to kill and to die for their belief. They provided the backbone of the final resistance to Rome, holding out in their fortress at Masada after Jerusalem itself had fallen. They believed in the Messiah but did not recognize Jesus as the One sent by God. They believed that the Messiah must be a political leader who would deliver Israel from Roman occupation.
Of these three groups, only the Pharisees survived the onslaught of the Roman/Jewish war. The zealots who were the primogenitors of the war were extirpated during the war. The Sadducees lost their pride, power and the foundation of their existence with the destruction of the Temple during the war. They even lost the confidence of the people because of their compromise with the Roman dominion. The Pharisees on the other hand because of their insistence on the Law, practice of piety outside the Temple, they survived the holocaust. With the Temple gone, the synagogues became their recourse. Perrin (1974) observed that the Pharisees rose to the challenges of shattered Judaism by setting up a new center at Jamnia, in the remote northwest of the ancient territory of Judah, and there they began to settle the canon and text of scripture, to codify the interpretation of the Law, and in general to systematize matters of belief and practice.

The gospel of Matthew is written with constant dialogue with the developments going on at Jamnia. For Perrin (1974) the Church he writes for is closely related to a synagogue "across the street" in any gentile city with a strong Jewish element in its population. Since Matthew's gospel also has connections with specifically Palestinian Christian traditions, the city probably was in Syria. Isolating Palestinian Christian traditions in Matthew from dialogue with Judaism is the work of form criticism outside the purview of this paper.
Like other New Testament authors, Matthew wrestles with the problems of his time. The problems are external and internal. The external included explaining the delay in the Parousia, destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, dialogue with Judaism. Internally, he grapples with the nascent movement becoming a church, a self-conscious entity with policies to guide it. The text of Matt 18,17 tends to provide solution to one the internal problems facing the new movement, namely, settlement of misunderstandings between members.

EXEGETICAL INTERPRETATION OF MATT 18,17

Ean de parakousē autōn, eipe tē ekklēsia. Ean de kai tēs ekklēsias parakousē, estō soi hōsper ho ethnikos kai ho telōnēs.

Matt 18,17 has one textual problem as recorded by Nestle-Aland (1998). D *pc* ff[1*] inserted *hōs* before *ho telōnēs*. A look at the manuscripts that contain the insertion reveals that they are later manuscripts. Again, addition of the insertion makes the text an easy to read. Considering the recentness of the manuscripts that contain the insertion and the principle of *lectio difficilior*, we affirm that probably our text is closer to the original.

We now present our working translation as: "now if he refuses to listen to them, speak to the church. Now if he refuses to listen to the churches, let him be to you as the gentile and the tax collector".

Ean is used to introduce an 'if' clause, the protasis of some conditional sentences. The mood in the protasis is usually in the subjunctive while the apodosis or main clause may be either present or future indicative, or an imperative (Swetnam, 1998). The *ean* in the text introduces a potential situation, the phrase in the apodosis gives what is deemed the appropriate action if the situation arises. This explains why *parakousē* is in the present subjunctive 3rd person active voice.

Parakousē is a compound verb from *parakouein*. Bauer (2000) explains it to mean to pay no attention to something that has been heard. It is to refuse to listen to or to disobey. Thus, in the context of our text, it communicates the sense that the person in question has been confronted. He is in the know of his offence. His refusal to listen is conscious. The disobedience is volitional. It carries the force of intransigence and doggedness in offence. Kittel (1995) holds that it has the sense of unwillingness to hear. For Hagner (1995) it means to disregard. It depicts a snobbish attitude. Blass and Debruner (2007) notes that verbs of perception like *parakouein* take genitive. Therefore, we have *autōn* in the genitive.

Eipe is aorist imperative 2nd person singular. The aorist tense expresses the verb of speaking, *eipe* as an action viewed as taken once and for all. It is non-repetitive. The complainant in this case does not need to weary the church with repetitive report that the offender has not hearkened. It is enough that the matter has come up to the church, and the church has acted by approaching the accused but still he refused to listen to her. Hagner (1995) explains that when the offending person does not listen to the group of two or three, the matter is to be brought to the attention of the community.

The word *ekklēsia* has a total of 114 occurrences in the NT. Of these, there are only three occurrences in the gospels, all in Matt (Matt 16,18; 18,18). It is very frequent in Paul's letters (46x) of which 22 are in 1Corinthians. In deuteron-Pauline letters it has 16 occurrences, 23 in Acts and 2x in Hebrews, once in James and 20x in Revelation. Etymologically, it is derived from *ek* and *kaleō* denoting the totality of those who are called out (Roloff, 1990). In history of scholarship, the term has variously undergone some terminological shifts, but overwhelming majority of NT passages use it as a fixed Christian term for congregation, congregational assembly or church. The NT sees *ekklēsia* as a theological and less as an organizational entity. In a series of passages which reflect the earliest Christian usage, we see the phrase, *ekklēsia tou theou* (church of God) cf. 1Cor 1,2; 10,32; 11,22; 15,9; 2Cor 1,1; Gal 1,13; and plural in 1Cor 11,16.22; 1Thes 2,14; 2Thes 1,4. The genitive 'of God' is not simply an addendum defining the preceding term 'church' but is instead an integral part of a fixed terminological formulation used in correspondence with the eschatological self-understanding of the church as the elect of God as new Israel. According to Roloff (1990) wherever the term *ekklēsia* appears on its own as an ecclesiological term, it must be understood as an abbreviation of the original term *ekklēsia tou theou*. It is a messianic community. It constitutes the congregation of the new Israel. It is the gathering of the new people of God. Jesus is the head of this gathering and the church is the members. He is always present in the gathering of his Church giving realistic force to their decisions here on earth (Matt 18,18-20).

Ethnikos pertains to nationhood foreign to a specific national group, with focus on morality or belief, unbelieving, worldly, polytheistic (Bauer, 2001). In the NT, it is the non-Israelite/gentile in contrast to the children of Abraham. Schmidt (1995) documents that the OT and Jewish claim is clearly expressed in Mat 5,47, where the *ethnikoi* are set in opposition to those who fulfil the Law. The term is usually on the same parlance with a tax collector (*telōnēs*) in terms of morality, yet they are not synonymous

because national connotation. Thus, the phrase *ethnikōs kai ouk Ioudaikōs* in Gal 2,14 makes it clear that the distinction from Judaism is always decisive. *Ho ethnikos kai ho telōnēs* of Matt 18,17 is comparable to *telōnai kai hamartōloi* of Luke 15,1. There is not question here of national distinction, but of the inner mark of a representative of the *ethnē*. This is why in Matt 6,7 *hupokritai* is textually possible instead of *ethnikoi*. Thus, Matt 18,17 teaches that the attention of the worshipping community (the Local Church) is called upon to correct an erring member. The community itself then apparently makes its plea, indeed the final pleas, the offender to repent. At this point it is believed that enough opportunity for repentance has been given, and that if the person has failed to respond appropriately, then only course of action that remains is ostracism or excommunication from the community (Hagner, 1995). This is the force of *estō soi hōsper ho ethnikos kai ho telōnēs*. The seeming derogatory use of ethnikos/gentile here reflects Matthew's Jewish-Christian community and is to be understood in the sense of heathen just as in Matt 5,47 and Matt 6,7. The offender is not therefore just excommunicated, he is taken as the worst sort of persons (cf. Paul's admonitions in 1Cor 5,9-13, 2Thes 3,14-15 and Titus 3,10).

MATT 18,17 AND CONFLICT RESOLUTIONS IN THE CHURCH

Matt 18,17 is part of a larger section spanning vv. 15-20. It deals with Jesus' guidelines for dealing with those who sin against us. The reader of this text must note that they are meant for Christians not unbelievers; for sins committed against you and not others; and conflict resolution in the context of the Church, not the community at large. Matthew's presentation is not meant to be a license for a frontal attack on every person who hurts or slights us. They are are not a license to start a destructive gossip campaign or to call for a church trial. They are designed to reconcile those who disagree so that all Christians can live in harmony. The Church is the final port of call for settlement because the church is the body of Christ and so exercises temporal and spiritual authorities over its members. To disobey her is to disobey Christ and ipso facto, God (see Matt 18,18). Willoughby (1907) contends that the church is the society of disciples of Christ who dwell in any place. The Christian disciple who refuses to be reconciled to his fellow Christian is to be regarded as no true member of the society. Thus Matt 18,17 is best seen as part of the community regulations spanning Matt 18,15-20. Perrin (1974) sees verse 15-20 as an expansion of a saying from Q source (Luke 17,3) by adding references to the need for witnesses to the church, to the authority of the church (18,18) and to the promise of the presence of the risen Lord in the church. All seen in Matt 18,15-20 is a major Matthean statement about the church. In verses 21-22 Matthew reproduces a regulation concerning the necessity for reconciliation within the community from Q (cf. Luke 17,4).

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Matt 18,17 as part of vv. 15-20 pericope is in the form of specific community regulations in instances where one member has sinned against another. It includes excommunication of the offending member by the church in extreme cases. According to the OT, the heathen does not belong to God's chosen people. The tax collector is outside the fellowship of the honourable children of Israel, since according to common estimation he is practicing a dirty trade and makes his living by collaborating with the heathen occupation army. The Jews consider them as outsiders. The church as the new people of God takes the same view. The brother who refuses to listen to the church is a sinner. He is outside the brother hood at once, without further ado, and is now explicitly regarded and styled as an outsider, although the church has not passed formal sentence. The community now ratifies a position which he took up of his own accord, he has cut himself off, and this is recognized by the community through the simple fact that he has rejected the help offered for his conversion (Wolfgang, 1969). The decision of the community is final. This gives the reason for v.18 because God will hear the petitions of even two Christians who agree together.

It must be noted that the concern of the author of the gospel of Matthew is not so much with ill-treatment of an offending member as to conflict resolution. His primary motive is to see that conflicts are resolved. The intransigence and incorrigibility of the offending member to the extent of a snobbery attitude against every level of attempt to a resolution of conflicts makes it clear that his Christian profession is

a mere *flatus vocis*. He does not really belong to the new people of God. If he does he would have at least listened to the church, regarded by Matthew as endowed with divine authority (vv. 18-20). To disregard even the church is to disregard God and thence makes oneself equal to an unbeliever. Since the offender is logically an unbeliever, the author believes that he should be treated as one. He does not actually imply antagonism in the sense of fighting the offender. *Estō soi hōsper ho ethnikos kai ho telōnēs* is another way of telling the members that if one snobs even the church, he is not actually a member of that church and not really a believer and should not be seen as one. He is not what he pretends to be. He is a hypocrite.

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