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BIBLICAL MODELS OF RECONCILIATION: A CONTEXTUAL STUDY OF MATTHEW 18:15–17 IN THE CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONS, ABAK LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA

PETER, GOODNEWS EFFIONG
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
Akwa Ibom State University
Obio Akpa Campus, Nigeria
goodnewspeter100@gmail.com

DR. VINCENT A. OLUSAKIN
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
Akwa Ibom State University
Obio Akpa Campus, Nigeria
vincentolusakin@aksu.edu.ng
08074953812

&
DR. STELLA P. ESSIEN
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
Akwa Ibom State University
Obio Akpa Campus, Nigeria
stellaessien@aksu.edu.ng
08037096449

ABSTRACT

Despite the Christian imperative for unity, the congregation of Church of Christ (COC) in Abak have witnessed persistent internal conflicts among both clergy and laity, jeopardizing their witness and mission. This study investigates the principles of reconciliation as presented in Matthew 18:15–17 and their practical implications for building unity within the congregations of the Church of Christ in Abak Local Government Area (LGA). Using a combination of exegetical and descriptive methodologies, this study interprets the biblical text within its historical and theological contexts and evaluates its relevance in contemporary church conflict resolution. The findings of the study revealed a high prevalence of conflict in the Church of Christ congregations in Abak. The work also established that the biblical model in Matthew 18:15–17 is often underutilized or misunderstood in Abak congregations. The neglect of its personal and communal steps frequently leads to escalation and unresolved tensions. The study concluded that Matthew 18:15–17 provides a structured, redemptive framework for addressing disputes, emphasizing private dialogue, communal mediation, and congregational accountability. It recommends intentional biblical teaching, leadership training, and the integration of reconciliation practices into the life of the church. The paper contributes to theological discourse on ecclesiastical peacebuilding and offers actionable strategies for enhancing harmony in faith communities.

Keywords: Conflict, Peace, Reconciliation, COC, Abak LGA.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of human interaction, and religious communities are not excluded from its influence. Throughout history, Christian churches have grappled with internal disputes, ranging from doctrinal disagreements to interpersonal tensions among members and leaders. The New Testament itself bears witness to this reality, with passages such as Acts 15, Galatians 2:11–14, and 1 Corinthians 1:10–17 showcasing early church conflicts. In contemporary Nigeria, the Church of Christ congregations (hereafter referred to as COC in the work) in Abak have not been immune to such challenges. These internal disputes, often stemming from leadership rivalries and misunderstandings, have significantly threatened the unity and effectiveness of the Church's mission. Matthew 18:15–17 presents a biblically grounded, step-by-step framework for reconciliation, spotlighting the direct personal confrontation, involvement of witnesses, and finally, communal arbitration within the church. These teachings, delivered by Jesus Christ, provide a model for building reconciliation that is both redemptive and restorative.

However, despite the scriptural clarity of this approach, its practical application within congregational life often remains superficial or neglected. The gap between biblical instruction and church practice necessitates a re-evaluation of how reconciliation is taught, understood, and implemented within local churches. In view of this, the present paper explores the exegetical foundations of Matthew 18:15–17 and investigates its contextual application among the COC in Abak LGA. It aims to bridge the disconnect between theological ideals and ecclesiastical realities, with the hope of providing clarity on how churches can become active agents of peace and unity.

CONCEPTUALIZING RECONCILIATION

Reconciliation is the process of restoring harmony and resolving differences between individuals, groups, or entities after a period of conflict or disagreement. According to Metuh (2000), reconciliation aims to bridge the gap created by conflict and bring about healing. The definition of reconciliation above suggests that something has gone wrong, hence the need for reconciliation. It also assumes that there is conflict either between two people, nations or groups who are in relationships marked by tension. Therefore, to briefly explicate the concept of reconciliation, it will be expedient to first elucidate the meaning of conflict, which is a necessitating factor of reconciliation. Unfortunately, there is no scholarly consensus on the definition of conflict and this work does not attempt to explore the scholarly debacle involved in advancing the meaning of conflict that is all encompassing.

However, the word "conflict" is derived from a Latin word "confligere" which means literally, "to strike together" (Adeyemo, 2000). Here, conflict is seen as a state of opposition between two or more people. Corroborating this, Nana (2024:149) asserts that conflict is seen as a social process due to a state of contradictions that is a product that is a product of difference in the aspiration, and wishes of individuals, groups and society. The above definition reveals that the incompatible or mismatched goals between more than two parties/states lead to conflict. In other words, conflicts arise between parties who perceive that they possess a

common incompatible goal. It bears mentioning that conflict is a common occurrence in human society, whether it be on an individual, communal, or international level. Conflict often results in severe consequences, including loss of life and destruction of property. In order to address these negative consequences and move towards a peaceful resolution, reconciliation becomes a necessary factor in conflict resolution. Reconciliation can be defined as the process of restoring relationships that have been damaged or broken as a result of conflict. It involves acknowledging the harm that has been done, taking responsibility for one's actions, and working towards healing and forgiveness. Igbokwe (2018:86) argues that, "reconciliation should be viewed as an ongoing process that facilitates peace, rather than being the final destination." Here, reconciliation is seen as a step by step process whose eventual end is in the restoration of peace and harmony to a situation that is hitherto conflictual (Nana and Udom, 2022).

RECONCILIATION AMONG THE ABAK PEOPLE

Edem and Udom (2024) argue that understanding a people's practices begins with knowing their identity and cultural background. Thus, examining the history and culture of the Abak people is vital to grasp their view of reconciliation. Abak, in southwestern Akwa Ibom State, was a colonial administrative hub and shares borders with Uyo, Etim Ekpo, Ukanafun, Oruk Anam, and Ikono LGAs. It covers 256 square kilometers, with over 139,000 people across five clans: Abak, Afaha Obong, Ediene, Midim, and Otoro, comprising 90 villages. Traditionally, Abak's economy was agrarian, focused on oil palm, yams, cassava, and crafts like pottery and blacksmithing. Western influence later shifted livelihoods toward commerce and urban jobs. According to Essien (2020a), Abak's socio-political structure was hierarchical, grounded in family (ufok), lineage (ekpuk), village (awio), and clan (iman), with governance led by elders and village heads (abong isong). Culturally, Abak values kinship, communal living, and patriarchal leadership (Obong Ufok), with social events being collective and marked by respect for elders and traditional dispute resolution (Essien, 2020b). The people are very spiritual, with traditional religion centered on *Awasi Ibom* (Supreme Being), ancestral veneration, and rituals. Christianity, introduced in the early 20th century, soon became dominant but did not erase indigenous beliefs, which persist and often blend with Christian practices (Nyoyoko & Essien, 2022; Ekanem, Essien & Okon, 2022).

Arguably, one of the fundamental challenges that have confronted Abak, like other societies is the inevitability of disagreement and conflict. This is because where there are human beings, there is bound to be incompatible interests and different perspectives about things, which will inevitably result in conflict. This is better captured in the proverbs *Afon inyene ntanga, ifono inana* (literally, it means "It is better to have someone to quarrel with than to lack one"). This popular Abak proverb captures holistically the reality, inevitability and even the necessity of conflict in human relationship. However, when conflict occurs in Abak, there is always a way to address it and reconcile the conflicting parties in order to build peace and harmonious coexistence in the society. In view of this, Essien (2020b) notes that reconciliation is a divine injunction, a duty, which the individual has to perform for personal equilibrium and for harmonious co-existence and societal peace.

Among the Abak, and by extension, the Annang, reconciliation is fundamentally viewed as the preservation of communal harmony and the restoration of human relationships. This relational approach is rooted in their cosmology, which posits a dual yet interconnected reality: the physical and the spiritual. Within this holistic worldview, harmony in the universe necessitates harmony within social kinship structures. Consequently, conflict is perceived not only as a clash of interests but also as a disruption of cosmic balance. Acts deemed to undermine this "harmonious monism" are believed to offend the gods (*adue ikpaisong*), severing the link between the spiritual and physical realms (Etim, 2005:56). Reconciliation (*njoiyo mbono*) is thus the ritual and social process of restoring this balance. Traditional institutions for reconciliation in Abak span hierarchical levels, from the nuclear family (Ufok) and extended kin (Epuk) to the village (awio/isong) and clan (Iman), led by the *akuku ikpaisong*. These structures are entrusted with mediating disputes and promoting societal cohesion through restorative justice.

CONFLICTS IN CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONS IN ABAK

Conflict, though often perceived as antithetical to the ideals of Christian fellowship, remains a recurring phenomenon within congregational life. In the COC in Abak, conflict manifests in varied forms, ranging from interpersonal disputes to leadership struggles and, in more troubling instances, physical confrontations. A widely shared understanding among members is that conflict is fundamentally linked to opposing interests, goals, or values. This notion is mirrored in the view of Adewale (2014:39), who describes conflict as an inevitable clash of values or opinions between individuals or groups. This conceptual understanding agrees with the lived experiences of members across different congregations. For instance, Elder Thomas Udo (Personal Communication, March 12, 2025), of the Afaha Obong congregation remarks thus: "We all say we are one in Christ, but when it comes to decision-making, everyone pushes their own agenda. It is like politics wearing a religious robe." His comment reveals how spiritual unity can be strained by competing personal or ideological interests, especially in administrative matters.

The frequency of conflict within these churches is another striking aspect. Conflicts occur regularly in diverse church contexts. Mfon Essien (Personal Communication, March 11, 2025), a member in Ukpom congregation, explains that it is not uncommon to see members argue over the simplest things in the church, such as who should lead a song, what to wear for a performance, among others. Before you know it, it becomes personal, and people stop talking to each other. This shows that even activities meant to promote unity, such as worship and music ministry, can become flashpoints for disagreement when not handled with mutual respect and understanding. Interpersonal conflicts appear to be among the most pervasive in the COC, Abak. Eno Bassey (Personal Communication, March 13, 2025), a member of the Ikot Ekpene Udo congregation, shared his experience, stating, "A fellow member accused me of mismanaging our group's funds. It was not true, but the accusation hurt me deeply. For months, we could not exchange greetings." Such narratives confirm Etuk's (2013:70) observation that the emotional and spiritual intimacy within religious communities often makes them more susceptible to personal conflicts, which can be prolonged and extremely damaging to fellowship.

Leadership conflicts also emerge as a significant challenge within the COC in Abak. These disputes often revolve around differing visions, competition for influence, and unresolved tensions among leaders. Minister Samuel Akpan (Personal Communication, March 18, 2025) of the Ediene congregation explains that "At times, ministers and church leaders argue endlessly about church programmes or property decisions. The discussions often turn into accusations. It weakens our authority before the congregation." His insight aligns with Miller's (2015:39) assertion that leadership conflicts can severely hinder church growth and erode trust between leaders and members. Such discord is not merely administrative but often reflects deeper ideological and relational rifts.

Perhaps the most alarming form of conflict reported is its occasional escalation into physical altercations. While such incidents are not commonplace, they are nonetheless significant. Victor Inyang (Personal Communication, March 16, 2025), at Abak Central congregation, recalls, "We once had a heated argument during a general meeting about a piece of land. One man threw a chair at another and a fight broke out. It was chaos. That day left a stain on our unity." This experience supports Metuh's (2000) warning that unresolved tensions in emotionally charged environments can erupt into physical violence. These moments, though rare, point to the consequences of prolonged conflict and ineffective dispute resolution mechanisms.

AN EXEGETICAL EXAMINATION OF MATTHEW 18:15–17
ENGLISH TRANSLATION (NRSV)
15 If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.

16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that 'every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses."

17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Greek Text of Matthew 18:15-17
15 Ἐάν δὲ ἁμαρτήσῃ εἰς σὲ ὁ ἀδελφός σου, ὕπαγε ἔλεγξον αὐτὸν μεταξὺ σοῦ καὶ αὐτοῦ μόνου. ἐάν σου ἀκούσῃ, ἐκέρδησας τὸν ἀδελφόν σου.

16 ἐάν δὲ μὴ ἀκούσῃ, παράλαβε μετὰ σοῦ ἕνα ἢ δύο ἄλλους, ἵνα ἐπὶ στόματος δύο μαρτύρων ἢ τριῶν σταθῇ πᾶν ῥῆμα.

17 ἐάν δὲ παρακούσῃ αὐτῶν, εἰπὲ τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ. ἐάν δὲ καὶ τῆς ἐκκλησίας παρακούσῃ, ἔστω σοι ὡς ὁ ἐθνικός καὶ ὁ τελώνης.

In Matthew 18:15, Jesus begins with the conditional phrase, "If your brother sins against you" (ean de hamartēsē eis se ho adelphos sou). The use of *ean* ("if") introduces a hypothetical but plausible situation that sets the condition for action: confrontation only becomes necessary if a real offense has occurred (Davies and Allison, 1991). The verb *hamartanō* ("to sin") implies

moral wrongdoing, and *εἰς σὲ* (eis se) directs that wrong personally toward the offended disciple. The term *ἀδελφός* (adelphos), translated as "brother," has a broad range of meanings. According to Thayer (1999:117), the noun *adelphos* could mean a brother from the same parents or only one parent, as in Matt 1:2; 4:18; one connected by tie of the Christian religion (i.e members of the same Christian community), as in 1 Cor. 7:15; having the same national ancestor, belonging to the same people, countryman, as in Acts 13:26; or a fellow believer, united to another by the bond of affection, as in Matt 23:8. This could also mean any fellow man. Jesus' use of *adelphos* was possibly the result of the male dominance of his disciples. This does not exclude women.

Rather than passively waiting for the offender to come to him, Jesus commands the offended party to take the proactive steps to go (*ὕπαγε*, hypage) and correct (ἔλεγξον, elegxōn) the offender privately. This is a deliberate effort to restore broken fellowship. The private setting preserves dignity, reduces gossip, and reflects the spirit of humility and reconciliation (Hagner, 1993). The focus is on winning the brother (ἐκερδήσας, ekerdēsas), that is, restoring the relationship rather than proving a point. Therefore, humility is key in such correction, preventing it from becoming a battle of pride or egos. Olusakin (2017:31) describes humility as seeing others as those who are better than oneself. Correcting one's brother with such mentality can foster reconciliation. If the brother listens (ἀκούση, akousē), reconciliation occurs, an outcome that values relationship over retribution. This active listening must be mutual.

The offended must speak in love, and the offender must listen with empathy. Jesus' goal here is restoration (katallassō), a theme that runs throughout the New Testament as a hallmark of Christian living. In the event that the brother is not saved from the sin he commits against the disciple by way of the private engagement, Jesus provides the second step to reconciliation. Jesus tells the disciples to *ean de mē akousē. paralabe meta sou eti hena ē duo, hina epi stomatos duo marturon ē trion stathē pan rhēma*. Thus, the disciple should take with him one or two more witnesses, so that upon the testimony of one or two witnesses, every word may be strengthened. This is in line with the Jewish legal practice drawn from Deuteronomy 19:15, which required multiple witnesses to establish truth and protect against false accusations. These witnesses are neutral participants who help verify the facts and encourage reconciliation. Their role blends legal integrity (soundness of moral character and honesty, [Oko, 2023:52]) with communal responsibility. They are to ensure that justice is pursued with fairness and love.

Matthew 18:17 presents the final stage of the reconciliation process. When the brother *parakousē*, disobeys or fails to hear or accept his fault in the presence of one or two more witnesses, the disciple must take the matter to the "*ekklēsia*" (church), the assembly of Christians gathered for worship, as in 1 Corinthians 14:19, 35. They are people hoping for eternal salvation through Jesus Christ who observe their own religious rites, hold their own religious meetings, and manage their own affairs according to regulations prescribed by Christ (Thayer 1999:173). The disciple, together with the witness or witnesses, must bring the behaviour of the brother to the attention of the group united into one body, of which he (the brother) is part, for redress.

At this point, the matter that started between two people privately is now out in the open for the whole church, manned by religious leaders, to see with the intention of winning the brother. Olusakin (2020a:12-13, 2020b:7) records that as a representative of Jesus (who is an epitome of love and reconciliation) on earth, the church through her leadership is a healing and reconciliatory community. Reconciliation is an important aspect of pastoral care: hence Jesus makes it the third step in reconciliation. However, Jesus states that if the offender refuses to listen to the church, "let him be to you as an ἔθνος (ethnos, Gentile) and a τελώνης (telōnēs, tax collector)." Jesus invokes categories often seen as spiritually distant or excluded from Jewish communal life. Yet this instruction must be interpreted in light of how Jesus himself treated Gentiles and tax collectors: with love, grace, and a call to repentance (Hagner, 1993). Thus, the offender is not excommunicated in the sense of hatred or banishment, but placed outside the protective fellowship of the church, with the hope that they will return in repentance (cf. 1 Cor. 5:5).

MATTHEW 18:15–17 AND RECONCILIATION IN THE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN ABAK

In addressing conflict and promoting reconciliation in the congregations of the COC in Abak, the application of Matthew 18:15–17 provides a powerful model grounded in humility, integrity, and the central goal of restoring relationships within the community. The text opens with the conditional phrase, "If your brother sins against you," which sets the context for personal accountability and reconciliation. Jesus implies that confrontation is necessary only if a genuine offense has occurred. In Abak, as in any church community, personal offenses may arise due to misunderstandings, differences in opinion, or personal failures. This first step requires that when a member feels wronged, they approach the individual who has sinned in a private, humble manner. For example, if one church member feels that another has acted unfairly or spoken rudely, they should first engage that person one-on-one.

The conversation should be aimed at seeking understanding, showing empathy, and offering forgiveness. In the COC, where interpersonal grievances often stem from miscommunication, unvoiced expectations, or latent jealousy, this clause serves as a corrective lens. It calls for discernment between verifiable moral transgressions and subjective personal offenses. Spiritual leaders must therefore engage their congregants in training that enhance emotional intelligence, biblical discernment, and self-examination. When congregations of Church in Abak choose to address issues based on clear, confirmed wrongdoing rather than on assumptions or personal offenses, they create a healthier environment, one where conflicts are resolved with grace and truth, rather than giving way to gossip, harsh judgment, or retaliation.

The goal of such confrontation, as Jesus affirms, is not moral victory but relational restoration: "If he listens to you, you have won your brother" (Matthew 18:15c). This presents a fundamental challenge to the prevailing dynamics of conflict in many COCs in Abak, where disputes are often approached with the intent to assert dominance or justify one's righteousness. The essence of Christian confrontation, however, is redemptive, not retributive. Ministers and church leaders must therefore recalibrate the spiritual imagination of their members. They should guide them to see reconciliation as a spiritual triumph. This can be nurtured through sermons, discipleship programmes, and mentorship relationships

that prioritize humility, forgiveness, and the prioritization of restored fellowship over personal vindication.

Yet, not all attempts at private reconciliation succeed. Jesus anticipates this and provides a second tier: "But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (Matthew 18:16). For example, if a church member feels slighted by a fellow believer and the issue remains unresolved after the initial private conversation, they can invite a minister, elder, or another respected member to assist. This ensures that the process remains transparent and grounded in accountability. It also reduces the temptation for either party to escalate the situation unnecessarily, providing a balanced perspective to the issue.

However, in the lived realities of the congregational life of the COC in Abak, this step is often misunderstood or misapplied. Instead of inviting spiritually mature witnesses, parties may recruit allies, often relatives, factional associates, or ideological sympathizers, thus converting a personal conflict into a communal crisis. To counter this, churches must define and formalize the role of "witnesses" as neutral, spiritually sensitive mediators known for their wisdom and impartiality. This could be institutionalized through mediation training for elders and respected members, ensuring that this stage of the process upholds both integrity and the pursuit of peace. When conducted properly, the involvement of witnesses will provide a redemptive check against personal bias and often reopens closed hearts to reconciliation.

Should the individual persist in unrepentance, Jesus prescribes a third level of involvement: "Tell it to the church" (Matthew 18:17). Here, the *ekklēsia* functions as a restorative community. The church is called to promote righteousness and justice as the foundation for the throne of God (Oko, 2020:192), and this divine mandate must also inform its internal practices of correction and reconciliation. In line with this calling, the communal telling of a member's wrongdoing should not resemble public shaming or authoritarian censure; rather, it must be a pastoral appeal undertaken in a spirit of love and restoration. To embody this spirit, churches in Abak can form reconciliation committees, comprised of elders, ministers, and spiritually mature laity, tasked with overseeing such sensitive matters. These councils must operate with confidentiality, compassion, and the aim of healing rather than exclusion. Done rightly, the church as a whole becomes a vessel of Christ's reconciling love, not merely an enforcer of ecclesiastical order (Essien, 2020c).

However, Jesus concludes this teaching with a sobering instruction: "If he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matthew 18:17b). This verse has often been interpreted as a warrant for excommunication or social exclusion. Yet, viewed through the lens of Jesus' own ministry, this instruction takes on a radically redemptive meaning. Jesus' treatment of pagans and tax collectors, such as Matthew himself and Zacchaeus, was not marked by condemnation but by compassionate outreach. Thus, this should not be an end to relationship, but rather a transformation of its nature, from one of intimate fellowship to one of gracious evangelism. Tragically, in some COCs in Abak, this step is misunderstood and mishandled, resulting in the total alienation of the erring member. Offenders are sometimes cut off from all forms of fellowship, pastoral care, and community

support. This not only contradicts the spirit of Christ's teaching but can leave wounded souls further hardened and estranged from the faith.

To address this, COC should consider developing intentional restoration ministries, teams of elders, ministers, and compassionate laypersons who reach out to those who have been disciplined. These ministries would offer pastoral counseling, spiritual guidance, and opportunities for reintegration, thus upholding both the church's commitment to holiness and its call to redemptive love (Olusakin and Udom, 2025). Therefore, when the threefold approach outlined in this passage is thoughtfully and faithfully applied within the COC in Abak, it will create a spiritually nurturing framework for conflict resolution that upholds truth, nurtures accountability, and ultimately aims for reconciliation.

CONCLUSION

Matthew 18:15–17 presents a biblically grounded and pastorally sensitive framework for addressing interpersonal conflict and promoting reconciliation within the COC in Abak. The structured progression from private admonition to communal engagement accentuates the importance of relational integrity, accountability, and restorative discipline within the Christian community. Each stage is designed to preserve the dignity of all parties, to uphold the unity of the church, and to reflect the character of Christ in communal life. If applied thoughtfully, this model can cultivate a culture of humility, mutual respect, and spiritual maturity. Therefore, this passage calls the church to embody the values of grace, truth, and redemptive love, thereby reinforcing its witness both within and beyond the local congregation. As such, the text serves as a theological imperative for cultivating peace and reconciliation in the body of Christ.

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