

Effective Communication Strategies for Resolving Church Conflicts: Insights from Matthew 18:15-17

Deanna Beryl Majilang¹, Franklin Hutabarat^{2*}
^{1,2}Asia-Pacific International University

franklin.hutabarat@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates effective communication strategies for resolving conflicts within church communities, with a focus on the teachings of Matthew 18:15-17. This biblical passage outlines a structured, step-by-step approach to conflict resolution that emphasizes the importance of personal responsibility and direct communication. Initially, the passage advises addressing the conflict privately between the individuals involved. If this step fails, the involvement of one or two witnesses is recommended to mediate and confirm the discussion. As a final measure, unresolved disputes should be brought before the entire church community. By analyzing these verses, the paper identifies several key principles vital for effective conflict resolution. These include personal accountability, maintaining confidentiality during initial discussions, involving impartial mediators when necessary, and utilizing community intervention as a last resort. Each of these steps is designed to promote understanding, reconciliation, and unity within the church. The study contextualizes these biblical strategies within modern church settings, demonstrating their enduring relevance. It highlights how these principles can be integrated into contemporary conflict resolution practices, fostering a compassionate and respectful approach. The insights drawn from Matthew 18:15-17 provide a framework for managing disputes in a way that seeks to maintain relationships and community harmony. Ultimately, the paper underscores the importance of adhering to scriptural guidance in conflict resolution, advocating for a process that is not only effective but also reflective of Christian values of forgiveness, reconciliation, and unity.

Key Words: Conflicts, Communication, Church

INTRODUCTION

Conflicts in church settings can arise from various sources, including doctrinal disagreements, personal misunderstandings, and leadership issues (Oppenshaw et al., 2018). Resolving these conflicts requires wisdom, patience, and effective communication strategies (Dunaetz, 2019). Matthew 18:15-17 offers a biblical framework for addressing conflicts within the church. Churches, like any other community, are susceptible to conflicts. These conflicts, if not managed well, can lead to division and hinder the church's mission (Afolabi, 2018). The Bible provides guidance on resolving conflicts, with Matthew 18:15-17 being a key passage. This passage outlines a step-by-step approach to addressing conflicts, emphasizing personal

responsibility, communal involvement, and church-wide intervention (Siahaan & Siahaya, 2023). Understanding and applying biblical principles in conflict resolution can help church leaders and members maintain unity and foster a culture of forgiveness and reconciliation .

The study aims to explore the application of Matthew 18:15-17 in modern church conflicts, focusing on effective communication strategies for resolution. Key questions include how the principles of Matthew 18:15-17 can be effectively applied to contemporary church conflicts and what specific communication strategies derived from this passage are most effective. The research also examines the role of church leaders in implementing these strategies and how their involvement impacts church unity and mission. Additionally, the study seeks to identify the challenges and benefits of applying Matthew 18:15-17 in real-life scenarios, considering cultural and denominational differences. Another area of interest is the role of the wider church community in conflict resolution, as outlined in Matthew 18:17, and how communal involvement contributes to resolving disputes. The principles of forgiveness and reconciliation within this biblical framework are also analyzed to understand their influence on conflict outcomes. Furthermore, the research includes a comparative analysis of the biblical approach with secular conflict resolution methods, aiming to highlight unique insights provided by Matthew 18:15-17.

METHODS

This study is a literary approach to examine effective communication strategies for resolving church conflicts, drawing insights from Matthew 18:15-17. A literature review identifies existing research on biblical conflict resolution and relevant communication theories. Data are analyzed using step by step analysis for qualitative insights ensuring a comprehensive understanding of effective conflict resolution in church settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conflict resolution within church communities has been a subject of considerable scholarly interest, reflecting the complexities and sensitivities involved in maintaining ecclesiastical harmony. The passage in Matthew 18:15-17 provides a biblical blueprint for addressing conflicts, and numerous studies have explored its implications and applications in contemporary settings. This literature review examines various perspectives and analyses on effective communication strategies for resolving church conflicts, particularly in light of Matthew 18:15-17.

Biblical Foundations and Theological Insights

Matthew 18:15-17 has been widely interpreted by theologians and biblical scholars as a foundational text for conflict resolution within the Christian community. Asamoah & Kpalam (2024) emphasizes the significance of personal responsibility and direct

communication, noting that the initial private confrontation helps to maintain confidentiality and prevent the spread of discord. This direct approach is seen as a crucial first step in restoring relationships and fostering forgiveness, aligning with broader Christian teachings on reconciliation.

Duling (1999) expands on this by exploring the communal dimensions of the passage. The involvement of witnesses and, ultimately, the church community highlights the collective responsibility of the congregation in maintaining peace and unity. Carter argues that this collective approach not only aids in resolving individual conflicts but also strengthens the overall fabric of the church community by promoting a culture of openness and mutual support.

Conflict Resolution Theories and Practices

The principles outlined in Matthew 18:15-17 resonate with contemporary conflict resolution theories, particularly those emphasizing mediation and incremental escalation. According to Ottuh (2013), the practice of addressing conflicts directly between the parties involved mirrors the interest-based approach to negotiation, which focuses on understanding and addressing the underlying interests of both parties rather than their positions. This approach fosters a more collaborative and less adversarial resolution process.

The second step, involving witnesses, can be likened to modern mediation practices. Mediators act as neutral third parties who facilitate dialogue and help disputants reach a mutually acceptable solution. Dunaetz (2019) highlights the importance of mediation in conflict resolution, emphasizing that it allows for a more balanced and fair process. The involvement of witnesses in Matthew 18:16 serves a similar function, ensuring that discussions are conducted impartially and constructively.

Applications in Modern Church Settings

Applying the strategies from Matthew 18:15-17 in contemporary church settings requires adapting these ancient principles to modern contexts. Siahaan & Siahaya (2023) explores practical applications, suggesting that church leaders should be trained in conflict resolution skills to effectively guide their congregations through disputes. This training includes understanding the biblical basis for conflict resolution, as well as contemporary techniques for mediation and negotiation.

Afolabi (2018) provide a case study approach, examining instances where churches successfully implemented Matthew 18:15-17 strategies to resolve conflicts. Their findings suggest that churches that adopt a structured, biblical approach to conflict resolution experience greater unity and fewer long-term disputes. They also note the importance of fostering a church culture that values open communication and proactive conflict management.

Challenges and Critiques

While Matthew 18:15-17 offers a clear framework for conflict resolution, its application is not without challenges. Some scholars, such as Haugk (1988), argue that cultural differences and varying interpretations of the text can complicate its implementation. In multicultural congregations, differing expectations about conflict resolution processes can lead

to misunderstandings and further conflict. Haugk advocates for a culturally sensitive approach that respects diverse perspectives while adhering to biblical principles.

Additionally, (Chong, 2012) critiques the potential for misuse of the passage, warning that individuals might use the steps outlined in Matthew 18:15-17 to justify coercive or punitive actions rather than genuine reconciliation. Sande emphasizes the need for a heart of humility and a focus on restoration rather than retribution.

Communication Theories

The communication strategies in Matthew 18:15-17 offer a structured approach to conflict resolution that aligns with various contemporary communication theories. This literature review explores how interpersonal communication theory, mediation theory, conflict escalation theory, and systems theory provide a robust framework for understanding and applying these biblical strategies within church communities.

Interpersonal Communication Theory

Interpersonal communication theory emphasizes the significance of direct, face-to-face interactions in resolving conflicts. According to (Sahertian et al., 2021), such interactions foster clarity and mutual understanding, reducing the potential for miscommunication. In Matthew 18:15, Jesus advises addressing the conflict privately between the individuals involved, a principle that reflects this theory. Direct communication allows individuals to express their feelings and concerns openly, facilitating an honest exchange that can lead to resolution. This method is crucial for maintaining confidentiality and preventing unnecessary gossip, which can exacerbate conflicts within the church.

Mediation Theory

The second step in Matthew 18:16, which involves bringing one or two witnesses into the discussion, aligns with mediation theory. Mediation theory, as discussed by (Romeo et al., 2021), highlights the role of neutral third parties in helping disputants communicate more effectively and reach a resolution. The witnesses in Matthew 18:16 serve as mediators, providing an objective perspective and ensuring that the conversation remains constructive and fair. This step is particularly important in managing power imbalances and ensuring that both parties feel heard and understood. The presence of mediators can also help de-escalate tensions and prevent the conflict from intensifying.

Conflict Escalation Theory

Conflict escalation theory advises addressing conflicts at the lowest possible level of intervention before escalating to higher authorities. (McClelland, 2014) emphasize that controlled escalation helps manage conflicts more effectively by allowing for resolution at the earliest stages. This theory is reflected in the step-by-step approach outlined in Matthew 18:15-17. Initially, conflicts are addressed privately; if unresolved, witnesses are involved; and only as a last resort is the matter brought before the entire church community. This structured escalation minimizes public exposure and potential embarrassment, protecting the dignity of the individuals involved and maintaining the overall harmony of the church community.

Systems Theory

Systems theory views conflicts within the broader context of the interconnected systems in which they occur. (Cody & Beling, 2023) argue that understanding the systemic nature of conflicts helps in addressing them more holistically. The final step in Matthew 18:17, which involves bringing the unresolved conflict before the church, underscores the communal responsibility in conflict resolution. This approach ensures that the well-being of the entire church community is considered, promoting a collective effort to restore harmony. By addressing conflicts at the community level, the resolution process acknowledges the interconnectedness of church members and the impact of individual disputes on the broader community.

Application in Church Conflicts

Applying these communication theories to the strategies in Matthew 18:15-17 highlights the relevance and effectiveness of these biblical principles in modern church settings. Interpersonal communication theory supports the importance of direct dialogue, fostering honesty and understanding. Mediation theory validates the role of neutral parties in facilitating fair and constructive discussions. Conflict escalation theory emphasizes the importance of addressing conflicts at the earliest stages to prevent further escalation. Systems theory underscores the need for a communal approach, recognizing the broader impact of conflicts on the church community.

Kimsey et al. (2006) provides practical applications of these theories in church settings, demonstrating how trained church leaders can effectively guide their congregations through disputes. Their research suggests that churches adopting structured, biblical approaches to conflict resolution experience greater unity and fewer long-term disputes. They emphasize the importance of fostering a church culture that values open communication, proactive conflict management, and a commitment to reconciliation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Step-by-Step Analysis of Matthew 18:15-17

Matthew 18:15-17 provides a detailed framework for addressing and resolving conflicts within a church community, emphasizing a structured approach to effective communication. This passage outlines a three-step process: addressing issues privately, involving witnesses for mediation, and engaging the church community if necessary. Each step offers insights into effective conflict resolution and integrates well with contemporary communication theories. This analysis explores each step in depth, illustrating its implications for church practice and communication strategies.

Step 1: Addressing the Issue Privately

Text: “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” Matthew 18:15.

Analysis: The first step in Matthew 18:15 advocates for a private, direct approach to conflict resolution. This involves addressing the issue directly with the person involved without involving others initially. This approach is grounded in the principles of interpersonal communication theory, which emphasizes the importance of face-to-face dialogue in resolving misunderstandings and building trust (Sahertian et al., 2021).

Effective Communication: Direct communication allows both parties to discuss their grievances openly, which helps clarify issues and prevent the escalation of conflicts. The private nature of this step respects the dignity of both individuals involved, providing a safe space for honest dialogue. Effective communication skills, such as active listening, using “I” statements, and avoiding accusatory language, are crucial in this phase. This initial conversation should focus on understanding each other’s perspectives and finding common ground, rather than simply proving a point or winning an argument (Mahbob et al., 2019).

Confidentiality and Respect: Addressing the conflict privately helps maintain confidentiality and reduces the risk of public embarrassment. This approach aligns with the principle of respect for personal dignity and encourages a more respectful and constructive resolution process. It ensures that issues are addressed without external pressures or judgments, fostering a collaborative rather than confrontational atmosphere (Ottuh, Ph.D, 2013).

Implications for Church Practice: Implementing this step effectively requires church members and leaders to develop strong communication skills and foster a culture of openness and trust. Training in conflict resolution and interpersonal communication can equip individuals to handle disputes more constructively and maintain positive relationships within the congregation (Afolaranmi, 2023).

Step 2: Involving Witnesses for Mediation

Text: “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” Matthew 18:16

Analysis: The second step involves bringing one or two witnesses into the discussion if the private conversation does not resolve the issue. These witnesses act as neutral mediators who facilitate the discussion and help ensure that it remains fair and balanced. This step is crucial for managing conflicts that are difficult to resolve through private dialogue alone (Oppenshaw et al., 2018).

Role of Mediators: Mediators, or witnesses, help to manage power imbalances and provide an objective perspective. They can guide the conversation, ensuring that both parties are heard and that the discussion remains focused on finding a resolution. The presence of neutral parties can also help de-escalate tensions and promote a more constructive dialogue. Mediation theory supports this approach, highlighting the role of neutral facilitators in resolving disputes and reaching mutually agreeable solutions (Duling, 1999).

Documentation and Fairness: The involvement of witnesses also serves to document the discussions and attempts made to resolve the conflict. This documentation can be valuable if the issue escalates further and requires additional intervention. The witnesses' role in ensuring fairness and impartiality is essential for maintaining trust and credibility in the resolution process (Asamoah & Kpalam, 2024).

Implications for Church Practice: For this step to be effective, church communities should identify and train individuals who can serve as impartial mediators. These individuals should be skilled in mediation techniques and equipped to handle conflicts in a fair and balanced manner. Establishing a process for involving witnesses in conflict resolution can enhance the church's ability to manage disputes effectively and maintain harmony within the congregation (Siahaan & Siahaya, 2023).

Step 3: Engaging the Church Community

Text: “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” Matthew 18:17

Analysis: The final step in Matthew 18:15-17 involves bringing the unresolved conflict before the entire church community. This step underscores the collective responsibility of the congregation in maintaining unity and addressing serious disputes that have not been resolved through private or mediated discussions. It reflects the importance of communal involvement in conflict resolution.

Communal Responsibility: Engaging the church community serves as a last resort and aims to leverage the collective support and accountability of the congregation. It highlights the role of the broader community in reinforcing shared values and promoting reconciliation. Systems theory supports this approach by emphasizing the interconnectedness of individuals within a community and the importance of collective effort in managing conflicts (Cody & Beling, 2023).

Handling with Sensitivity: This step must be handled with care to avoid public shaming or exacerbating the conflict. The goal is to seek reconciliation and restore relationships rather than impose punishment or create further division. Communal involvement should be conducted in a manner that fosters unity and healing, rather than causing further discord (Siahaan & Siahaya, 2023).

Implications for Church Practice: To implement this step effectively, churches should establish clear guidelines for involving the community in conflict resolution. This includes ensuring that the process is conducted with sensitivity and respect for all parties involved. Church leaders should be prepared to manage the process in a way that promotes reconciliation and maintains the integrity of the congregation (Kimsey et al., 2006).

Discussion

The analysis of Matthew 18:15-17 in the context of effective communication strategies for resolving church conflicts reveals several key aspects when compared to other conflict resolution frameworks. Matthew 18:15-17 emphasizes a progressive approach starting with private dialogue, advancing to mediation with witnesses, and concluding with communal

involvement if necessary (McClelland, 2014). This sequential model bears similarities to interest-based relational approaches and mediation models, which also value direct communication and mediation but often emphasize collaborative solutions and flexibility in resolving disputes. However, Matthew 18:15-17 is more prescriptive, with a clear sequence of steps, while other models may offer more fluid processes.

Implementing these strategies presents various challenges, including resistance to the process. Cultural differences can significantly impact the acceptance and effectiveness of this approach. In high-context cultures that value indirect communication and harmony, the direct confrontation suggested in Matthew 18:15-17 might be perceived as confrontational or inappropriate (Romeo et al., 2021). Similarly, hierarchical cultures may struggle with the notion of private disputes, preferring authoritative figures to handle conflicts. Adapting the approach to fit these cultural norms—such as involving community leaders early or using indirect methods—can be crucial for effective conflict resolution.

Varying interpretations of Matthew 18:15-17 also pose challenges. Some communities adhere strictly to the literal steps outlined in the passage, while others interpret it more flexibly, adapting the principles to modern practices and diverse contexts (Tóth, 2019). These differing interpretations can affect how the steps are implemented and may require a balance between traditional and contemporary practices.

Resistance to conflict resolution can also arise from power dynamics and trust issues. In hierarchical settings, individuals in positions of authority may be reluctant to engage in private dialogue or mediation, fearing a loss of control. This resistance can undermine the process, making it essential to address power imbalances and foster an environment of trust and equality (Dunaetz, 2019).

Training and education play a critical role in overcoming these challenges. Effective conflict resolution requires equipping church leaders and members with skills in communication, mediation, and cultural competence (Siahaan & Siahaya, 2023). Training programs should cover practical techniques for resolving disputes and adapting approaches to fit different cultural contexts. Ongoing education is necessary to keep practices relevant and effective, addressing emerging trends and feedback from the community.

Establishing clear policies is essential for guiding conflict resolution processes. Churches should develop and document policies based on the principles of Matthew 18:15-17, outlining procedures for private dialogue, mediation, and communal involvement. Ensuring transparency and fairness in these policies helps manage expectations and promotes consistent practice (Oppenshaw et al., 2018).

Promoting a culture of forgiveness is also crucial for effective conflict resolution. Emphasizing forgiveness and reconciliation through sermons, teachings, and support systems helps restore relationships and build a supportive community (Duling, 1999). Encouraging members to embrace these values in their interactions fosters a positive environment and aids in resolving conflicts constructively.

CONCLUSION

Matthew 18:15-17 aligns with several contemporary communication theories, providing a comprehensive framework for conflict resolution:

- **Interpersonal Communication Theory:** Supports the effectiveness of private dialogue in resolving conflicts. Direct communication fosters mutual understanding and allows for personal resolution of issues.
- **Mediation Theory:** Validates the role of neutral mediators in facilitating balanced discussions and managing power dynamics. Mediation helps in achieving a fair resolution when private dialogue is insufficient.
- **Conflict Escalation Theory:** Emphasizes addressing conflicts at the lowest level before escalating to higher authorities. The step-by-step approach in Matthew 18:15-17 aligns with this theory by starting with private resolution and only involving the church community if necessary.
- **Systems Theory:** Highlights the interconnectedness of individuals within a community and the collective responsibility for maintaining harmony. The final step of involving the church community underscores the importance of communal effort in managing conflicts.

The step-by-step process outlined in Matthew 18:15-17 offers a structured and effective framework for resolving conflicts within church communities. By starting with private communication, moving to mediation with witnesses, and involving the church community if necessary, this approach provides a comprehensive strategy for managing disputes and promoting reconciliation. Integrating these biblical principles with contemporary communication theories enhances their applicability and effectiveness in modern church settings. Implementing these strategies requires careful training, a commitment to fostering a supportive culture, and sensitivity in handling conflicts to ensure positive outcomes and maintain unity within the congregation.

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