

Dear Nancy,

Thank you for writing us at Christian Questions Radio. You asked how Matthew 18 can be applied by the sinned against party (the parishioner) when the pastor and elders are the offending parties, having sinned against him. "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 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. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as a pagan or a tax collector." (Matthew 18:15-17)

We believe the scriptures teach that the administration of justice within the Church is a whole Church matter. Therefore, in the event that the pastor and elders are the offending parties, they would be subject to the same disciplinary process as any other Church member would be. We realize that many congregations frown upon this procedure when it involves persons in positions of leadership, since these persons are often chosen by a church governing body and not elected from within the congregation and by the congregation members themselves. If the church members elected their own elders, as we believe should always be the case, then the same rules of justice would apply to the elders as to the rest of the congregation. If at any time the elders were found to be derelict of their duties to the flock, a vote could be taken wherein they could be released from their positions.

We will briefly state the procedure that should be followed according with Matthew 18:15-17 when there is an offense within the Church. First the injured party should point out the supposed wrong to the offenders. If no action to right the wrong is taken and the error of sin continues, then two or three brethren without previous prejudice should be asked to hear the matter and advise the parties in dispute. If this committee decides unanimously with one party, the other should acquiesce and the matter brought to an end—correction, or restitution, so far as possible, being promptly made. If the offending party still persists in the wrong course, the one who made the original charge and the committee may exercise the privilege of bringing the matter before the entire Church. Thus the elders are in no sense to be judges of the members. Hearing and judgment is left to the Church. The committee would then call a general meeting of all Church members in order to hear the case and come to a decision in which the peace and oneness of the Church would be preserved. If the wrongdoers repent during the proceedings, it should be a cause for thanksgiving and rejoicing. If, on the other hand, the transgressors refuse to hear (obey) the decision of the entire Church, no punishment is to be inflicted. The Church is merely to withdraw fellowship and other manifestations of brotherhood from the offenders. (See Matthew 18:17.) The Church would then, most likely, call for a vote to remove the pastor and elders from their positions of leadership.

Unfortunately, the above process may not be allowed in your congregation when a pastor and elders are involved. Nonetheless, the process is a reasonable one and is based on scripture. Hopefully, the spirit of sound minds will prevail and the offenses will be resolved. The administration of justice within a Church is a very serious matter and should not be done in haste or be executed for minor offences. We hope we have answered your question. Please write us again.

Sincerely, Christian Questions Radio