

“CHURCH” – THE OFFICERS OF THE CHURCH

AN EXPOSITION OF MATTHEW 18:17

“And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church...”

The word ‘church’ is used in the New Testament to denote the body of professing believers in any place, as represented by their rulers and office-bearers. This refers to the body of men met not for worship but for the governing of the local church. The Old Testament illustrates and the New Testament prescribes (Matthew 18:17) and illustrates (Acts 14:23) that the church should be governed by select representatives.

The phrase *“tell it to the Church”* in Matthew 18:17 is a key passage for the defence of representative government in the New Testament Church. The question to be settled here is what did Christ mean by the word “Church”? The interpretation of this word is various, ranging from Pope, general council, civil magistrate, Jewish synagogue, and a company of arbitrators (Owen 1988, 15:270), to the whole body of believers.

That this is speaking of the Church as opposed to the civil magistrate is evident from the following facts. The nature of the “trespass” against a brother in this passage is primarily against Christ and his cause. The word used (*hamartano* - ἁμαρτάνω), generally translated “sin” is not the word normally used for being wronged or injured (I Corinthians 6:7-8) but rather a word that speaks of

wrong against Christ; to “scandalise” (Matthew 18:6 “offend”) the cause of Christ (cf. I Corinthians 8:11-12). Not only is there a distinction made between the civil and church case here, but there is the difference between the private and public implications of the case. The word in Matthew 18:15 translated “tell him his faults” is a word that is ‘never used for private injuries’ but is ‘the only word used for the rebuke given, or to be given, unto a scandalous offender, II Corinthians 2:6.’ (Owen 1988, 15:271f) (cf. Luke 3:19; Ephesians 5:13; John 16:8; I Timothy 5:20; Titus 2:15; 1:9). The public and the spiritual nature of this case is further identified by the fact that the offender is to be perused out of communion with other believers (Matthew 18:17-20).

That the phrase “tell it to the church” is not speaking of the Jewish Synagogue (Plummer n.d., 253) is evident from the following facts. The Jewish synagogue is never in the New Testament referred to as the *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία). A more conclusive argument is the idea of Christ assigning such a weighty decision on a moral or spiritual offence (D. Bannerman 1976, 180) to “whited sepulchres,” “hypocrites” (Matthew 23:27) and those who did not receive him (John 1:11).

Further, Christ had already (Matthew 16:18) spoken of his church and the disciples would no doubt have made the connection to the former. Christ is speaking of a time yet future; (cf. Matthew 16:18) he is not referring to a present particular case but rather giving a prescription for the use of the church in every age. There would come a time when congregations would spring up in different locations across the world (cf. Matthew 28:19;

Acts 1:8) and it would be necessary to have representatives to govern the local assemblies. When this direction was given Christ was there in body and if rebuke had been needed he would have done it personally (*cf.* Matthew 16:22-23). While Christ was with them they needed no other tribunal to settle disputes, no other voice of authority. But soon it would be otherwise and there would be need of an external organised body for judicial matters. Implied in the words of the Lord "*there am I in the midst*" of such a situation is the presence of the spirit of Christ *after* his ascension, not while he was with them in person.

That this is speaking of the representative body of the Church (Berkhof 1988, 555) (Calvin, Harmony of the Gospels 1993, 16:356) (D. Bannerman 1976, 180) (J. Bannerman 1974, 1:14) (Dickson 1981, 248) (Dick 2004, 4:306) (Adams 1998, 2:522) rather than the whole body of believers (Lenski 2001, 701f), (Broadus 1990, 388); (Goodwin 1996, 11:71, 74); (Owen 1988, 15:270ff) (Thomas 1979, 362) is evident from the following. Whether this word is translated church or congregation (as Tyndale and the Revised Version later did) is inconsequential. A singular noun (i.e. church *or* congregation) is often used as synecdoche, where the part stands for the whole or the whole for the part. We use this figure of speech every day; we speak of "the Law" when we are referring to a police officer (he represents the law, or is a *part* of law enforcement). This was a common way of speaking among the Jews throughout the Old Testament; that which is said of the elders in Deuteronomy 19:12 and Joshua 20:4 is said of the congregation in Numbers 35:24 and Joshua 20:6.

When the elders speak they speak for the people and when the people speak, they speak by the elders. This figure of speech is used of the leaders and elders of the people because they represent, speak for and symbolise the entire body.

The principle of representative government is used throughout the Old Testament and into the New Testament (Exodus 3:16, 18; 4:29; 17:5-6; 18:13-27; 19:7; 24:1,9-11; Leviticus 4:15; 9:1-2; Numbers 11:14-25; Deuteronomy 5:23; 22:15-17; 27:1; Joshua 7:6; 8:33; Judges 21:16; I Kings 8:1-3; I Chronicles 21:16; Psalm 107:32; Ezekiel 8:1; Luke 22:66 [πρεσβυτέριον]). Later it was the practice of Paul to ordain (χειροτονέω to elect by raising hands) a plurality of elders in every city (Acts 14:23).

When the Lord therefore, lays out the procedure for an erring individual in the Church those who heard him, being Jews, “must have understood the authorized rulers as distinct from the ruled to be the parties who were to determine in such controversies” (J. Bannerman 1974, 1:14). An impartial consideration of this text in the immediate and canonical context calls for this interpretation.

Those who interpret this to mean the congregation at large are arguing that the congregation is a judicial, authoritative body with ultimate determination. But Paul’s counsel contends against this. While not denying membership to those who are have publicly scandalised the cause of Christ, Paul restricts leadership to those

who are “*blameless*” (I Timothy 3:2), or those who have an “established character” (Tertullian 2004, Ch. 39, p. 46). If “the Church” in Matthew 18:17 is speaking of the congregation then there are those who are ‘blameworthy’ sitting in judgement of others and this argues against the direction Paul is going in I Timothy 3:2-4. Tertullian (AD 160-220) in his “Apology” states that “the tried men of our elders preside over us, obtaining that honour not by purchase, but by established character” (Tertullian 2004, Ch. 39, p. 46).

That this is speaking of a judicial body as opposed to telling the offence “before many” (*cf.* I Timothy 5:20) is evident from the following facts. The witnesses called to speak to the case (*cf.* Vs. 16) identifies this as an official and judicial affair. Paul is clear in his letter to Timothy to rebuke “*before all*” (I Timothy 5:20) and not a rebuke “*by all.*” The rebuke delivered by the church is official, authoritative and judicial rather than slanderous and unremitting. The individual is to benefit from church discipline, not to be slandered and reviled. The censure administered is said to be by “the Church” because, while it is administered by the elders as representatives; “Christ would not say ‘tell the officers and rulers of the church’ but ‘tell the church’ because an obstinate offender is not to be excommunicated secretly or in a corner, but with the knowledge and consent of the whole church...” (Gillespie 1844, 190).

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