

WHEN A PASTOR SINS

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The opening statement in our church's "Tenets of Faith", found on page 2, Article 4 of our Memorandum of Association (Constitution and By-Laws), says this:

The Bible is our all sufficient rule for faith and practice.

This statement sets forth the supremacy of the scriptures in all matters that relate to our church. Constitutions and By-Laws, as important as they are for many reasons, are man made. The scriptures are God inspired and must take precedence over everything else if we are to have a truly New Testament church.

One of the clearest and direct commandments in the New Testament when it comes to the ministry of a pastor, is about how a church must respond when a pastor sins. To be the church God has called us to be, requires that we practice all diligence to understand and obey what the scriptures teach about this.

In spite of clarity the scriptures give to the process that must be followed when a pastor sins, and the strong warning about not obeying the directives given, it is one of the least observed, and most often disobeyed passage in the New Testament.

The text is 1 Timothy chapter 5:17-24.

¹⁷The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. ¹⁸For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,"^[b] and "The worker deserves his wages."^[c] ¹⁹Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. ²⁰Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.

²¹I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favouritism.

²²Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure.

²³Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.

²⁴The sins of some men are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them. ²⁵In the same way, good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not cannot be hidden.

This passage is similar to what Jesus taught in Matthew 18. The main difference is that while the Matthew 18 passage applies to the whole church, the Timothy passage applies only to elders. The word “elders” has to do with “spiritual overseers”, which in the New Testament refers to pastors and others in the five-fold ministries. (See Ephesians 4:10-12.)

In Matthew 18, the process Jesus taught us to follow when a fellow Christian sins is three-fold. First, the person sinned against is to go to the offender to see if repentance and resolution will take place privately. If it does, the matter ends there and should no longer be an issue. If it doesn't, the second step is to take two or three witnesses to be present as the offended person makes his/her appeal again. If the person does not repent then the next step is to tell the church.

In the Timothy passage, once it is established by two or three credible witnesses that a pastor has sinned, it is no longer a private matter but the pastor is to be rebuked before the church.

This raises many questions such as:

- Isn't this a double standard? Why is it that for members of the church a sin against another can be resolved privately while a pastor has his sin exposed through a public rebuke?
- What is meant by the word “rebuke” and what purpose is served by doing this in a public setting?
- Why would God require a pastor to be exposed to such shame?
- Why is a congregation not involved in the correction process until the end, and then all they hear is the rebuke? Isn't this un-democratic?

We will look at these questions and more as we examine each verse of the text. We begin with verses 17-18.

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. ¹⁸For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,"^[b] and "The worker deserves his wages."

As the text indicates, to be a pastor is to be in a place of honour, in fact, double honour. The word “pastor” means “shepherd”, so in the church a pastor is the primary leader of the flock of God. He/she is an “under-shepherd” of the Chief Shepherd, who is Jesus our Lord. This should lead pastors to a place of humility. To be honoured by our Lord through a call and commission to share with Christ his ministry as shepherd, is the most humbling thing that can happen to a person.

Just as the scriptures teach the special role that a pastor has in a church should be respected by the church body as being a place of “double honour”, the scriptures also teach that it is a role where “double accountability” applies.

This does not mean there is a double standard. The commandments of Christ are for everyone, not just pastors or other leaders. When Jesus gave the great commission to the church he required that in preaching the gospel we must, “teach them to observe everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20).

Much of the New Testament writings are about maturing in our walk with Christ through changing from our sinful ways to pattern our behaviour after Christ. Every Christian is called upon to mature in his/her faith and Christian walk. A pastor must be one who demonstrates the fruit of the Spirit in his/her life in all areas the Bible requires for ministry. There is no double standard. A pastor and his/her spouse are simply ones who have sufficiently matured to the point that there are no habitual sins that could hurt the church. Every Christian is called to this kind of maturity.

In Matthew 18 Jesus taught how serious God considers this matter to be.

During the time the disciples spent with Jesus they were, in a sense, in ministry training. Jesus placed a child in their midst and told them they must be converted and become like this child. It was only in that place of humility could they ever hope to mature in character. He warned them that if, as leaders, they permitted sin to go unresolved in their life or in the church they could cause sheep to be lost. He warned them about unconfessed and unresolved sin, stating that it would be better for a millstone to be tied around a person’s neck and that person be drowned in the sea rather than persist in sin and in any way justify it. This was strong teaching indeed!

In order to be a pastor the Bible teaches that he must be qualified. Qualifications for ministry are given two chapters earlier, in 1 Timothy 3. To be suited for ministry is unlike any other calling or career. We usually think in terms of education and aptitude when we think of qualifications for a job. Graduation from a college or university, or through an apprentice-ship program, then on to a certification process, is the usual path to being licensed to practice in a profession or trade. The Christian ministry is not like that. Though “studying to show yourself approved” is scriptural, no amount of education prepares a person for ministry.

Similarly, neither natural talents nor the endowment of spiritual gifts qualifies a person for ministry.

Character is what God deems to be essential. I Timothy chapter 3 and Titus chapter 1 are the principle passages that set forth qualifications for ministry with the entire texts devoted to character. With respect to how essential each character quality is, the term that is used is “must”. Each character quality listed is mandatory, not optional. It cannot be said that if one possesses most of the characteristics required that should be

good enough. The Word of God says “must” to in relation to each one. The qualifications can be grouped into five main categories. They are:

- Proper use of the tongue (The tongue has the power of life and death...Proverbs 18:21.)
- Other relational character qualities
- Relationship to money
- Family
- Ability to communicate the Word of God

The role of the pastor is such that he/she must be able to demonstrate maturity in each area in order to be in ministry. The scriptures teach that a pastor’s spouse must be equally mature. Unless that is the case, the person called to be a pastor must wait until his/her spouse meets the character requirements before entering pastoral ministry.

The next verses to look at in the 1 Timothy 5 passage are verses 19-20.

¹⁹Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.

Given the context, reference to “sin” is any behaviour that falls short of the character attributes described in chapter 1 Timothy 3.

If a pastor wrongs one person and the wrong done does not affect the whole church, the pastor is in a position to resolve the matter privately. Once the same type of behaviour is experienced by two or three people it becomes a public matter. The whole church is to be told what the sin and the pastor needs to publicly take responsibility for what he or his spouse has done. Depending on the nature of the sin and the contriteness of the pastor, a determination of future ministry needs to be decided. If the sin is habitual, meaning there is an obvious need to mature in one of the character requirements for ministry, the pastor needs to take time to mature in that area before returning to ministry.

This does not mean the person must be perfect. There has only been one perfect man and that one is Jesus. What the Bible teaches is that, “A pastor must be blameless”. (1 Timothy 3:2.)

There is a relationship between being blameless and having a clear conscience. Paul said this to Timothy:

¹⁸Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, ¹⁹holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith.
1 Timothy 1:18-19

According to this text, to, “fight the good fight” and win, is only possible through two principle things: faith and a clear conscience.

A clear conscience comes not as a result of ever having sinned, but only through full acknowledgement of sin and repentance. Paul knew this from experience. One scripture I find amazing is found in Acts 20:26, where Paul told the Ephesian elders (Timothy would have been present):

Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men.

It seems incredible that a man, who was responsible for the death of so many innocent Christians, could make such a statement. However, it was true. His conscience was clear. Obviously, it wasn't clear due to him never having sinned. Repentance and forgiveness removed all his guilt so it was through the grace of God that Paul could make this remarkable assertion and in doing so be telling the absolute truth. This is a valuable lesson for all of us.

When any of us sin, including a pastor, a restored conscience only comes through confession of the sin, acknowledging the damage done to others, and true repentance. A pastor who meets the qualifications for ministry, but then sins, will, by the very virtues he has developed that qualifies him for ministry, be the first to want to stand before a congregation, acknowledge the sin, and ask forgiveness.

Why do this before the congregation? There are three reasons that come to mind. First, there is a risk that the same sin may have been committed against another believer who did not come forward and tell what happened. Second, it is human nature to deny wrongdoing, either by minimizing the nature of the sin or by rationalizations. A public rebuke does much to prevent this. More will be said about this later in this study. Third, and most important, it is what the Word of God says must be done.

A rebuke is not designed to be a shaming experience. A pastor who walks in humility and then sins will be the first to want to appear before his congregation and, if necessary, rebuke himself, rather than see one person stumble over the sin he committed. The purpose of a rebuke is to expose the nature of sin and the damage it can do and then offer forgiveness through repentance to the one who sinned.

Notice from our text, that the congregation was not called upon to judge the matter. Timothy, whom Paul appointed to be the pastor at Ephesus, was assigned the responsibility of both judging whether or not a sin had been committed, and then, if there was, to inform the church. No doubt he did this together with other elders.

The purpose for a public rebuke is stated in the text to be so that “all may take warning”. A pastor is a shepherd so his call is to lead the church. The example he sets is the example others will follow. If a pastor or his spouse commits sin that affects the church and does not repent of it, an example that “sin doesn't matter” is set before the congregation. Through a public rebuke the church is taught a healthy fear of the Lord.

An example is set before the congregation, that when any one of them sins they should take responsibility for it. The public rebuke of a pastor is not punitive, but restorative. It is not about vengeance, it is about correction.

The next verse to look at from the 1 Timothy 5 text is verse 21.

I charge you in the sight of God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favouritism.

One might look at the requirements the Bible sets forth for the public rebuke of a minister as being too harsh, undemocratic, and shaming. Therefore, it is reasoned, another method should be found. The fact is, very few churches, denominations, or credential issuing fellowships follow these scriptural directives, and when they do it is only for sexual sins or the theft of money. It is reasoned that other sins should be dealt with behind closed doors.

Any time church culture evolves away from the precepts and commands of the New Testament, the church is actually devolving into something quite different than God intended. We cannot ignore commands given in passages like 1 Timothy, and expect to see the power and presence of God in the church in the degree of measure we pray for.

Paul issued a “charge” to Timothy regarding this. He didn’t mince words. He made the discipline of a pastor who sins an unequivocal imperative.

The witnesses to this charge were God, Jesus Christ, and the elect angels. The charge was issued by them with Paul being the mouthpiece. It is amazing that many take the matter so lightly.

In the Book of Acts, we read about a meeting that took place between Paul and the Ephesian elders. Timothy was among them. Paul said:

⁸Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God,^[b] which he bought with his own blood. ²⁹I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. Acts 20:28-31

Dealing with pastors who sin is something so close to the heart of God that it caused Paul to warn each leader about this continually for three years, night and day, and with tears.

God, who is all knowing and has complete foreknowledge of everything, could see the path the church would take down through the centuries and see the numbers of times its leaders would sin and cause untold damage. Without doubt, the burden on Paul’s heart

that caused him such great pain, was placed there by God, who, in that same spirit, would unceasingly warn the church of today about the same thing.

God is raising up ministers today who will accept that burden and warn the church in the same way Paul did and put into practice the principles he taught.

Paul identified two types of men/women who should not be in Christian ministry. The first group he called, “savage wolves”, (Acts 20:29). A savage wolf is one who attacks the church from the outside. There have been many of them down through the years who have tempted innocent sheep away from Christ through sin or false doctrine, and in doing so, devoured them.

The second group comes from within. This group is by far the most difficult to deal with since their influence is from within. Many are loved and have good qualities about them. Often they are gifted and influential. They are known for two things. One is that they distort the truth and the other is they draw away disciples after them.

Distorting the truth can mean one of two things. It can refer to changing the meaning of scriptures and thereby teaching something God did not intend. It can also mean to distort the truth about themselves by minimizing or denying wrongs or sins they practice.

The next verse to look at in the 1 Timothy 5 passage is verse 22.

Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure.

The laying on of hands refers to ordination to the Christian ministry. Timothy had experienced this himself. Paul, in writing to him about the directives he had given concerning the Christian ministry said these words to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:11-14.

Command and teach these things. ¹²Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. ¹³Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. ¹⁴Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you.

In directing Timothy to not be hasty in the laying on of hands meant he should be as sure as he possibly could that those who he ordained to ministry met the scriptural qualifications for ministry.

The next part of the statement in 1 Timothy 5:22, is often misunderstood. Paul said, “Do not share in the sins of others”. At first glance this could be thought to mean that if someone asks you to commit sin you should say “no!” While that is certainly true, it is not the meaning in this instance.

Paul was teaching Timothy that if he did not follow the directives given when it came to the correction and discipline of pastors who sin, he was not simply avoiding a responsibility that God gave him, he was actually participating in the sin.

In other words, if a person is in a position to do something about the sin another commits, but does nothing, he/she becomes party to the sin. In legal terms he would be considered an “accessory after the fact”. This indeed is a weighty matter!

Denominations, credential issuing fellowships, elders and other pastors who are in a position to correct a pastor who sins, but fail to do so “share” in the sin. They became become party to the sin. The same applies to church members who know that a minister has sinned but do nothing to address the sin by not taking the matter to other leaders.

Paul ends the verse by saying: “Keep yourself pure”. Again, the meaning is understood by the context. We defile ourselves when we do not practice the discipline of ministers who sin and hold them accountable in the manner the Bible prescribes.

The next verse in the 1 Timothy 5 text seems, at first glance, to be a misfit. It is verse 23.

Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses

The verse is not a misfit. It explains the stress that Timothy must have felt in carrying out the directives Paul gave. The church at Ephesus was very large, with many pastors and other elders. Some of them might have been in Timothy’s family. For sure, many would have been his close friends.

I can imagine that when one of them sinned, making a public rebuke was the last thing Timothy wanted to do. Why not deal with it privately? What if the church doesn’t understand? What if there is resistance from the church, especially when the sinning pastor is very popular? Why didn’t God find another way – perhaps have the congregation vote on the matter? These, and perhaps several others, might have been the questions Timothy asked.

The fact was, given the context the scripture about wine for the stomach’s sake, dealing with difficult church matters was causing Timothy to be sick. Paul didn’t change the instructions, he simply directed Timothy to take some wine and do the best he could to look after himself.

Paul then gave Timothy another very important reason for dealing with a pastor who sins in the manner prescribed. It is found in the next verses, 23-24, of the 1 Timothy 5 passage.

The sins of some men are obvious reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of some trail behind them; In the same way, good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not cannot be hidden.

Though the principles taught in this text apply to everyone, they were given specifically in regard to pastors or elders who sin. Some sins are obvious. Adultery, theft, physical violence, would be some sins that are quite obvious, leaving no doubt that a pastor who commits them should not be in ministry.

But some sins are not so obvious. For example, sins of the tongue or other relational sins can be hidden in a cloud of denial that obscures the sin from everyone's view, except from those who were victims, and the elders who afterward became aware of the sin.

Denial takes on many forms. From the Book of Genesis and the account of the fall of man, we learn that it is rooted in shame and expresses itself in various ways. The purpose of denial is to either minimize or rationalize sin due to deep inner conflicts that have not been resolved. Persons who practice denial need understanding and help. Here are some denial strategies I have encountered over the years.

1. Grace

There is teaching today in some parts of the church, that since none of us can be righteous apart from the grace of God, then sin should never disqualify a person from ministry. A few years ago I heard a preacher who had committed adultery preach on this. He stated that since righteousness is not based on works, it is the grace of God that qualifies a person for ministry. This was the basis of him continuing in ministry in spite of his sin.

The man was, of course, right in many respects. It is only by the grace of God that any man or woman is equipped for any service in God's kingdom. However, what was missing in the sermon I heard, was any mention of the difference between justification and sanctification. Justification is our standing in Christ based on the finished work of Christ on the cross, and our receiving by grace, through faith, the gift of salvation.

Sanctification is our spiritual growth, the maturing of character where our lives bear the fruit of the Spirit reflecting the life of Christ in us. This too takes the grace of God.

In his book, Restoring Fallen Leaders, Jack Hayford likens a minister who falls through immorality to a person being hit by a truck on a highway. The person is rushed to the hospital barely cling to life. Restoring a minister to a place of ministry right after a fall would be similar to releasing a seriously injured person from a hospital before they can sustain life on their own. Ministers who sin need time to seek help, correction and healing before returning to ministry.

For a minister who has sinned to return to ministry without a restoration and maturing process is not an expression of the grace of God. In fact, the exact opposite is true. The grace that saves us is the grace that can mature us, enabling us to minister in the name of Christ free from habitual sin. To continue in ministry after a fall is a denial of the grace of God not a manifestation of it.

I only accept what Christ says about me

This statement, in the right context, is absolutely true and wonderful. Once we turn to Christ through repentance and receive his forgiveness, there is no condemnation. We are free from guilt and are free to walk in the newness of life that our Lord provides.

However, to use this statement as a way to justify un-confessed sin and to deny the affect the sin had on others is a form of denial. It minimizes the sin and, in effect, transfers responsibility for it onto the victim(s).

Vengeance belongs to God alone

This statement is used to blame leaders who hold another leader accountable for wrong doing. It is also used generally by any Christian who does not want to take responsibility for a sin when he should.

Vengeance is the wrath of God upon the ungodly. Church discipline is the very opposite. It is an appeal to the person who has sinned to come out of their denial, admit their wrong, accept responsibility for the hurt done to others, and find the help he/she needs.

Why can't people just forgive me?

The Bible teaches that Christians should forgive. It also teaches that forgiveness has no effect without repentance. In fact, to forgive someone who hasn't repented is counter-productive. Jesus said:

³So watch yourselves.

"If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. Luke 17:3.

We must be willing to forgive and walk in forgiveness but this does not mean we should not hold others accountable for sin.

Consider again the example of Jesus. When he was nailed to the cross he prayed for those who were killing him asking his father in heaven to forgive them. This prayer was answered, not at the time it was prayed, but some 50 days later. On the day of Pentecost the killers of Jesus listened to Peter preach about what they had done and they asked what they should do. Peter instructed them to repent and be baptized. They did this and were added to the church. Repentance is what released the power of forgiveness that Jesus prayed for.

A person who does not acknowledge his sin, repent of it, and take responsibility for it, and then demands forgiveness from others, is attempting to transfer the responsibility for the sin onto others.

The church is a hospital, not a place to hold people accountable for sin

The church is a place for healing, restoration and help. However, the church does not become this by denying sin, acknowledging its affect, and not practicing accountability. It is only when it does this that it becomes a hospital for sinners and victims.

God has not called us to judge

This is a common belief widely held by Christians. However, it is unscriptural when it comes to bringing reproof and correction in the church.

Jesus said:

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Luke 6:37

The context makes the meaning of judging to be for the purpose of condemning. Correction and discipline in the church should never be for that purpose. As the text goes on to explain, judging should only be for the purpose of forgiveness and restoration.

Paul, when writing to the Corinthian church, reproved them for not judging disputes in the church. Due to the church's failure to do this, believers were taken each other to court. The whole account of this is in 1 Corinthians chapter 6.

You are an accuser!

One of the most common defending strategies for rationalizing sin is to blame the one who addresses the sin. Paul did not tell Timothy to not accept an accusation. On the contrary, he told him to accept an accusation if, by the mouth of two or three credible witnesses, it could be substantiated.

Why can't people see the good in me? Why do they just focus on the bad?

Qualifications for ministry are not determined by good in a person's character outweighing the bad. Rather, it is determined by evidence of maturity in each and every character requirement the scriptures require for ministry.

The problem is a lack of submission

If a pastor resists appeals made to him/her to take responsibility for wrongful behaviour, it is likely the pastor will blame the person making the appeal. Due to the authority that a pastor has in a church, the grounds upon which the pastor's counter-accusation is made is "lack of submission. God never intended that submission to spiritual authority extended in any way to submission to sin. A pastor who does this abuses the authority of his office. This is sin.

I'm not the only one who did wrong

Last Sunday morning's Bible message was on the subject, "The Tongue". Included in the notes that were distributed was the following quote from a website called AbusiveLove.com, under section 4:00, Thirty-Four Examples of Verbal Abuse Behaviour:

“ Abusers like to bring you down to their level. You may find yourself becoming abusive in retaliation; in this case the abuser can say you are no better than the abuser. Note: Abusers are much better at arguing and winning so going down to their level means that you have lost; this is a variation of one person hitting another until the other eventually hits back.”

One rationalization when denying wrong-doing is to point to the wrongs of others. In doing this, an attempt is made to deflect responsibility for the wrong a person has done onto another person. This is one of the reasons why the scriptures teach that when a pastor or his/her spouse sins, a rebuke before the congregation must take place. Otherwise, since a pastor is in a place of influence, he/she can easily mislead others, either in word or deed.

If a person has no scruples when it comes to not acknowledging a sin he has committed, it is quite possible he will mislead people with same lack of integrity.

Emotional Attachments

Pastors who do wrong are not entirely bad. In fact, they usually have many good qualities and do a lot of good. They endear themselves to others forming strong friendships and other kinds of good relational bonds. This is a good thing and it is what the church is designed for. The church is a body where we are to love and care for one another.

When it comes to sin, emotional attachments should not determine how a church responds. The church is to be first-and-foremost guided by the scriptures. Sympathy and empathy for a person should not be a deterrent to accountability. Sadly, however, in too many cases where correction should come to a church, emotional attachments take precedence. This can cause a great deal of confusion and lead to division.

In conclusion, I need to point out the purpose God puts instructions and warnings in the Bible like the ones in the text studied today, is so that our faith might increase. These scriptures might not seem very inspiring but in fact, they are. They hold out for us the possibility of what could be, what should be and what can be, if we yield ourselves to God. No person, pastors included, need to remain bound by habits they cannot break. The power and the grace of God is greater than all our sin. This is the truth we must embrace if the church is truly going to be the church in the days to come!

