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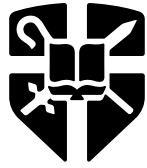

Malicious Witnesses, Church Order, and Pastoral Integrity: An Exposition of 1 Timothy 5:19–25

Joshua Henson

Introduction[1]

Honor toward pastors, and the authority of elders and the congregation in matters of conflict-resolution have fallen on hard times. A quick scan of pastoral integrity in mainline Evangelical churches might help us understand why many people in the church look at their pastors with doubt and suspicion. Financial and sexual scandals are far too prevalent. But there seems to be a fundamental error in many Christians' thinking about these matters which may be summarized as: "if a thing *can* go bad, it *will* go bad." There is no doubt that leaders can and do err. There is no doubt that unbridled power can, and often is, abused. But despite all the bad press that pastors get these days for their failures, it must be remembered that there are, nonetheless, many faithful pastors who have been targeted by disgruntled, bitter, and in some cases, jealous members who have an axe to grind.

Now let me add another layer of "complexity" to this sketch. Over the last 30 years or so, there has been a proliferation of "discernment ministry" para-church organizations, bloggers, and YouTube influencers that have assumed the responsibility of "sniffing" out corruption and pastoral abuse in the church. While I would not go so far as to say there is no place for such ministries, they have, nonetheless, tended to add more heat than light. As para-church organizations,

1. This paper was originally delivered at an annual Pastor's Fraternal at Trinity Reformed Baptist Church (Boones Mill, Virginia) on July 15, 2025.

they nonetheless presume some semblance of ecclesial authority that they do not possess. What's more, they seem to either forget, ignore, or even reject the biblical protocol for conflict-resolution provided in the word of God. Conflict-resolution is to be handled in the context of a church with duly ordained elders and a self-conscious polity according to which accusations are evaluated, prosecuted, and due-process is respected.

A deleterious effect of this para-church malaise is that many church members seem to think that their particular cause or agenda "*justifies*" their skirting of the Matthew 18 process for conflict resolution. In his book *Bully Pulpit*,[2] Michael J. Kruger addresses the problem of "abusive pastors." I fully acknowledge that there are abusive pastors and that it is a problem that needs to be addressed. But while *Bully Pulpit* has some helpful observations, it has some equally troubling applications. Two of those "troubling applications," in particular, stand out. First, though Kruger tries to carefully define "spiritual abuse," his definition leaves far too much to the imagination of disgruntled church members who are looking for a way to either slander their pastor or manipulate the DNA of a biblically-based philosophy of ministry. To put it another way, Kruger seems to assume that those levelling charges against pastors are immune to any agenda, whether it be a personal or corporate.[3] Second, Kruger asserts that Matthew

2. See Michael J. Kruger, *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022).

3. Kruger has been criticized on this point in various podcasts. In fairness, he responds by saying that he is not writing a book about the problem of those who level unjust or slanderous charges against pastors. Rather, his book seems to assume "abusive pastors" and then get on with the details about how to deal with them. However, the problem is that this is not how his book has been received by many. Sadly, many disgruntled church members have found ammunition in Kruger's book to bypass Matthew 18 when dealing with their pastor's "offenses" and instead "publicly shame them." It must be remembered that the Sons of Korah were not commended but condemned for their willful rebellion and slanderous campaign against Moses (see Numbers 16). Sometimes the bully is not the pastor, but a group of disgruntled congregants. For more on this perspective, see Guy Greenfield, *The Wounded Minister: Healing from and Preventing Personal Attacks* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001); G. Lloyd Rediger, *Clergy Killers: Guidance for Pastors and Congregations under Attack* (Louisville, KY: Westminster J. Knox Press, 1997); Jim Meyer, *Church Coup*

18 doesn't apply to "abusive pastors"[4] and that members may bypass it. But which comes first, the chicken or the egg? In other words, may a member or handful of members unilaterally decide that a pastor is abusive *and then* publicly slander that pastor apart from the courts of the church?

I've seen people influenced by Kruger's book take 1 Timothy 5:20 to mean that they, as members, may unilaterally and publicly rebuke a pastor whom *they believe* to be in sin. Now, while that whole notion is layered with all kinds of problems, the most disturbing is that it completely strips the accused of any protection or due process. Furthermore, it transfers the authority of the elders, and the courts of the church to the individual or a group of individuals. But most disturbingly, it encourages people to act upon unexamined assumptions. To put it another way, it tells Christians that "if you think a pastor is guilty of something, you may openly rebuke him all by yourself." This is not only sinfully inconsistent with the word of God, it also violates the subordinate confessional standard of Reformed Baptist churches. The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith, 1677/89 (hereafter: 2LBC) is clear about protocol in church conflict. Chapter 26, paragraph 13 of the 2LBC reads:

> Church members who have been offended and have performed their duty concerning the person by which they are offended, should not disrupt any church action or absent themselves from the assemblies of the church or administration of any ordinances because of the offence at any of their fellow members. Instead, they should look to Christ in the further action of the church.

(Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2013); Joshua Zeichik, "Defining and Responding to Sinful Pastoral Leadership" (D.Min. dissertation, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024).

4. Kruger, *Bully Pulpit*, 80–84. Kruger seeks to balance his definition of "spiritual abuse." He says that "merely pointing out sin is not an instance of abuse" (23). He further states that "not everything is abuse, so we have to make sure we don't confuse it with other problems or church members to turn every conflict into a case of spiritual abuse, throwing accusations around lightly and frivolously" (35). See pages 35–39 for some helpful qualifications.

My goal in this article is to work through 1 Timothy 5:19–25, answer some pressing exegetical questions, and draw some pastoral and ecclesial application from it regarding biblical protocol for addressing suspected sin in the lives of pastors. I shall begin with Paul's instructions to Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:19–25 (ESV):

> 19 Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. 20 As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. 21 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. 22 Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure. 23 (No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.) 24 The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. 25 So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.

My thesis is that in the midst of Paul's instruction to Timothy and the churches about how they should evaluate and adjudicate charges against a minister, *he calls for the rebuke of whomever is guilty in the process of adjudication, whether that is a legitimately guilty and unrepentant elder, or a legitimately guilty and unrepentant malicious witness.* Now on a surface reading of the text, this is not immediately clear. The ambiguity arises immediately in v. 20, with the phrase "those who persist in sin." Of whom is Paul speaking?

The Grammatical and Textual Profile of τοὺς ἁμαρτάνοντας

Before we get to the exegetical options for this referent, let me make a few comments about its translation.

Aspect of the Participle

Τοὺς ἁμαρτάνοντας is a present tense participle. The reason most translations gloss it as "those who *persist* in sin" or "those who *continue in* sin" is because the present tense conveys the imperfective aspect. This means that apart from any contextual restraints to the contrary, it is talking about "the ongoing nature of the verb." It is "unbound" without a beginning or end.[5] So, what we are talking about here is someone who is continuing in sin, that is, someone who is unrepentant.

What Kind of Participle?

But what kind of participle is this? I. Howard Marshall asserts that it is an attributive participle and that it is modifying "elder" in v. 19.[6] The NIV takes this option and translates the phrase as "those elders who are sinning." But the problem is that the mention of elder in v. 19 is singular while the participle in v. 20 is plural. This is a mismatch of concordance. Participles typically concord in number with the nouns they modify. I think it is a better fit to take this as a substantival participle, which means we simply translate with something like "those who persist in sin."[7]

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5. For a helpful definition, see Christopher J. Thomson, "What Is Aspect? Contrasting Definitions in General Linguistics and New Testament Studies," in *The Greek Verb Revisited: A Fresh Approach for Biblical Exegesis*, ed. Steven E. Runge and Christopher J. Fresch (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 13–80. He explained, "Perfective aspect is used to speak of the whole situation including that endpoint, while imperfective aspect is used to speak of a period before the endpoint has been reached" (63). Another helpful explanation comes from Geoffrey Horrocks who wrote, "It is instead a matter of the grammatically obligatory, but always subjective, choice of a speaker or writer to describe a given eventuality with either a perfective or an imperfective verb form that requires his/her audience to view that eventuality, respectively, either as "bounded" (i.e., with a beginning and end in time, thus focusing on its completeness and by implication eliding its middle) or "unbounded" (i.e., without a beginning or end in time, thus focusing on its incompleteness and by implication its undelimited middle)." See Geoffrey Horrocks, "Envoi," in *The Greek Verb Revisited: A Fresh Approach for Biblical Exegesis* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 630.

6. I. Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (London: T & T Clark, 1999), 618, fn. 151.

7. See Larry J. Perkins, *The Pastoral Letters: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, Baylor Handbook

Asyndeton

The third thing to notice is the absence of a conjunction in the Greek at the beginning of v. 20. Most translations will say something like "as for those…" or "but those…" The absence of a conjunction is called "asyndeton." Asyndeton is used to create a sense of speed, emphasis, or dramatic effect in writing or speech. Steven E. Runge notes that asyndeton "is used to indicate that the writer did not feel the need to specify any kind of relationship between the clauses."[8] In other words, the choice to use asyndeton represents the choice *not to specify a relation*. This, of course, caused some awkwardness in the minds of some scribes copying the manuscripts. One variant with seven witnesses reveals a scribe including the conjunction δέ between τοὺς and ἁμαρτάνοντας to try and smooth out the connection between vv. 19 and 20.[9] So v. 20 starts off with an ambiguous participial phrase about those who persist in sin, and it is unclear, at least on the surface, whom he's talking about. Is it the unrepentant elders or someone else?

Attempts to Identify τοὺς ἁμαρτάνοντας

The prevailing interpretation of τοὺς ἁμαρτάνοντας ("those who persist in sin") in 1 Timothy 5:20 is unrepentant elders.[10] There are a

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on the Greek New Testament (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 120. As a substantival participle, "those who persist in sin" functions as the direct object of ἔλεγχε (rebuke).

8. Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 20.

9. The variants are A (5th century), D (6th century), F (9th century), G (9th century), 1175 (10th century), It (majority of Old Latin witnesses), vgmss (Independent Vulgate manuscripts with independent readings).

10. See Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1983), 191 who says "[τοὺς ἁμαρτάνοντας] does not refer to the members of the church in general…but to the presbyters…,—those presbyters who, in their official work or general walk, do not conduct themselves in a manner worthy of their office. In such cases it does not matter whether a charge against them is brought before Timothy or not. Neither the present (ἁμαρτάνοντας) nor the lack of δέ disproves this view. The aorist (ἁμαρτήσαντας) would have pointed to some earlier incident, and δέ would be

number of challenges with this option. As already mentioned, there is disparity between the singular "elder" in v. 19 and the plural "those who continue in sin" in v. 20. Furthermore, as a general rule of hermeneutics and discourse analysis, when a referent in one clause is vague, it is often best to look at the nearest referent in the previous clause. In this case, the nearest referent to "those who persist in sin" in v. 20 is the "witnesses" at the tail-end of v. 19. This would be a better fit since "witnesses" and "those who persist in sin" are both plural. Now, connecting this phrase exclusively to the "elders" raises further questions about the words "rest" and "all" in v. 20. To whom is this referring? If "those who persist in sin" are elders, then they are to be rebuked in the presence of "all" so that the "rest" may stand in fear. Does the word "all" refer to the other elders, assuming there were other elders? Or does it refer to the congregation? Some take "all" as the other elders, or even aspiring elders, and "the rest" to be the congregation. Keep in mind that Paul chose not to specify the identity of "those who sin" with any concrete discourse marker. Patrick Fairbairn says this about the identity of "those who persist in sin":

> Some would understand the class of persons described as sinning, and in consequence deserving of rebuke, only of the elders mentioned in the preceding verse. But this is arbitrary, as in the words themselves there is no proper ground for the limitation; and the one verse does not appear to be any way dependent on the other.[11]

Other commentators would take "those who persist in sin" to refer to any member of the congregation. Now, this is the easiest option because it becomes a catch-all for everything. Even those who espouse

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necessary only if the apostle had had clearly in mind the contrast to the καλῶς προεστῶτες πρεσβύτεροι mentioned in ver. 17."

11. Patrick Fairbairn, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles: I and II Timothy, Titus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1956), 221.

this option would agree that it includes the elders. But it doesn't seem to fit the context. Why would Paul jump from "accused elders" and "witnesses" in v. 19 to "anyone who sins" in v. 20? In such a scenario, we would expect Paul to give some discourse markers indicating that he is broadening the scope of his instruction. A nuanced version of this option would say that it does not *exclusively* refer to unrepentant elders but to habitual sinners. For example, *The Expositor's Greek Testament* says:

> … Although… 1 Timothy 5:17–25 form[s] one section, marked by one prominent topic, the relation of Timothy to presbyters, it cannot be maintained that the connexion [sic] is indisputably obvious; and the use of the present participle suggests that habitual sinners are under discussion. One is reluctant to suppose that such men would be found amongst the presbyters of the Church.[12]

We need not be reluctant to posit that unrepentant elders are an option here. After all, one of the challenges Timothy is grappling with is false teachers in the churches, and the people need a protocol for dealing with them. Furthermore, in v. 22, Paul warns Timothy not to be hasty in the laying on of hands nor to take part in the sins of others. I take "laying on of hands" to refer to ordination. Some have tried to argue that it refers to receiving back lapsed members into the congregation, or even to a public accusation[13] but such proposals are strained at best. Paul is warning Timothy of improperly vetting a man into the ministry. Many a minister has stories of ordaining men who later disqualified themselves. In some cases, it is those hastily ordained men who serve as "malicious witnesses" against a faithful pastor and

12. See William Robertson Nicoll, *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961).

13. See B. P. Irwin, "The Laying on of Hands in 1 Timothy 5:22: A New Proposal," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 18, no. 1 (2008): 123–29.

must be removed. Paul is aware of this and that is why he says in vv. 24–25: "The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also, good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden." The danger of hasty ordinations and hidden moral corruption is a real problem in both ministers and members. So, we cannot exclude the possibility of elders as those "who persist in sin."

Whoever Is Guilty in the Adjudication Process

I argue that the phrase "those who persist in sin" is intentionally vague through asyndeton because Paul intends it to be taken as whomever is guilty in the adjudication process involving the accused elder and the witnesses. In other words, the rebuke in v. 20 should come to whomever the evidence leads and in whomever repentance is lacking. Stephen H. Levinsohn points out that asyndeton may also be used in contexts of close connection such as moving from *generic* to *specific*.[14] You have the generic situation of charges being brought against an elder, adjudication occurs, and a rebuke needs to be levied against the specific guilty party, whether that is the guilty elder or malicious witnesses who have brought unsubstantiated charges against an elder. Paul recognizes both situations are possible. Either way, the protocol is to bring the matter before the entire church after the adjudication of the elders. This is clear when the rebuke is publicly declared "in the presence of all." I am convinced that the main reason why so many commentators have failed to make this connection is because they have missed the intertextual allusion from the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 19:15–21. When 1 Timothy 5:19–25 is read against the backdrop of Deuteronomy 19:15–21, it becomes clear that malicious witnesses are a problem and that the church needs to know what to do with them.

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14. Stephen Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek: A Coursebook on the Information Structure of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed (Summer Institute of Linguistics, 2000), 119.

The Identity of τοὺς ἁμαρτάνοντας and Intertextual Allusion (Deuteronomy 19:15–21)

It is important to remember the context of what Paul is doing here. One may ask the question, "Is Paul giving a different set of instructions for confronting ministers than those given all other Christians in Matthew 18:15–20?" And the answer is "no." Paul is assuming our Lord's instructions for conflict resolution in the church. To put it another way, Matthew 18:15–20 equally applies to the offenses of pastors. However, due to the nature of a pastor's alleged sin, Paul is giving careful instruction about how to deal with it. While any sin in a congregation affects the whole congregation, the effect of a pastor's unrepentant sin is even more destructive since he is a leader in the church. Scandals and improprieties have the potential of deleteriously affecting people's trust in leaders, their view of the church, the authority of the preached word, and their personal faith. Accordingly, it is imperative that any charges brought against an elder are handled carefully and discreetly according to Matthew 18:15–20. If the church gets the impression that it is a trivial thing to bring charges against an elder, all bets are off for disgruntled members to air their slanderous opinions toward the man who weekly confronts their sins with the Word of God.

John Calvin gives helpful insight here:

> After having commanded that salaries should be paid to pastors, he likewise instructs Timothy not to allow them to be assailed by calumnies or loaded with any accusation but what is supported by sufficient proof. But it may be thought strange that he represents, as peculiar to elders, a law which is common to all. God lays down, authoritatively, this law as applicable to all cases, that they shall be decided "by the mouth of two or three witnesses." (Deuteronomy 17:6; Matthew 18:16.) Why then does the Apostle protect elders alone by this privilege, as if it were peculiar to them, that their innocence shall be defended against false accusations?

I reply, this is a necessary remedy against the malice of men; for none are more liable to slanders and calumnies than godly teachers. Not only does it arise from the difficulty of their office, that sometimes they either sink under it, or stagger, or halt, or blunder, in consequence of which wicked men seize many occasions for finding fault with them; but there is this additional vexation, that, although they perform their duty correctly, so as not to commit any error whatever, they never escape a thousand censures. And this is the craftiness of Satan, to draw away the hearts of men from ministers, that instruction may gradually fall into contempt. Thus, not only is wrong done to innocent persons, in having their reputation unjustly wounded, (which is exceedingly base in regard to those who hold so honorable a rank,) but the authority of the sacred doctrine of God is diminished.

And this is what Satan, as I have said, chiefly labors to accomplish; for not only is the saying of Plato true in this instance, that "the multitude are malicious, and envy those who are above them," but the more earnestly any pastor strives to advance the kingdom of Christ, so much the more is he loaded with envy, and so much the fiercer are the assaults made on him. Not only so, but as soon as any charge against the ministers of the word has gone abroad, it is believed as fully as if they were already convicted. This is not merely owing to the higher degree of moral excellence, which is demanded from them, but because almost all are tempted by Satan to excessive credulity, so that, without making any inquiry, they eagerly condemn their pastors, whose good name they ought rather to have defended. On good grounds, therefore, Paul opposes so heinous [an] iniquity, and forbids that elders shall be subjected to the slanders of wicked men till they have been convicted by sufficient proof. We need not wonder, therefore, if they whose duty it is to reprove the faults of all, to oppose the wicked desires of all, and to restrain

> by their severity every person whom they see going astray, have many enemies. What, then, will be the consequence; if we shall listen indiscriminately to all the slanders that are spread abroad concerning them?[15]

Calvin was very aware of the pressure of naysayers. He was run out of Geneva. He put his life on the line to guard the sacraments from Antinomians and Libertarians. And Timothy was not immune to this stress. A common symptom of stress is disruptions to the digestive system, ulcers, and stomach pain. I believe that Paul was addressing those symptoms in v. 22 when he told Timothy "no longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments." After more than a decade of pastoral ministry, I think I finally understand Paul's random comment to Timothy.

Now, in Matthew 18:15–20, our Lord is assuming the basic procedural nature of confronting members in the church from the Old Covenant code. Moses says much about how this is to be carried out. In particular, Deuteronomy 19:15–21 gives instructions about how charges are to be brought against anyone and what to do with malicious witnesses and false accusations. I submit that Paul's structure of 1 Timothy 5:19–25 closely follows these instructions.

15. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1948), 140–1.

The Clarification of Deuteronomy 19:15–21

Deut 19:15–21	1 Timothy 5:19–25
[15] A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of **two witnesses or of three witnesses** shall a **charge be established**. [16] If a **malicious witness** arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing, [17] then both parties to the dispute **shall appear before the LORD**, **before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days**. [18] The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, [19] then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. [20] **And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you.** [21] Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.	[19] Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. [20] As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. [21] In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. [22] Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure. [23] (No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.) [24] The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. [25] So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.

Notice the parallel of five elements in both passages:

Parallels in the Adjudication of an Accusation	
1.) The Necessity for Two or three Witnesses for Conviction (v. 15)	1.) The Necessity for Two or three Witnesses for Conviction (v. 19b)
2.) An Unrepentant Malicious Witness: "a malicious witness (v. 16a)	2.) Unrepentant elders or Malicious Witnesses: "those who persist in sin" (v. 20a)
3.) Judgment (v. 19) "then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother."	3.) Judgment (v. 20) "Rebuke them in the presence of all"
4.) A Triad of Witnesses to Judgment a. LORD (v. 17) b. Priests (v. 17) c. Judges (v. 17)	4.) A Triad of Witnesses to Judgment a. God (v. 21) b. Christ Jesus (v. 21) c. Elect Angels (v. 21)

5.) Response to Judgment a. The "rest" shall fear (v. 20) b. Show no partiality (vv. 19, 21)	5.) Response to Judgment a. The "rest" may stand in fear (v. 20) b. Show no partiality (v. 21)

The parallels strongly suggest that Paul was aware of the possibility of an unrepentant pastor *or* malicious witnesses. So, allow me to put all this together.

Putting It All Together

If a member believes that his pastor(s) is in sin, his/her first obligation, according to Matthew 18:15–20 is to privately address that offense with the pastor himself. Sadly, this is not what members typically do. Instead, they talk around and about their pastor through gossip and slander. Or, they overlook it. Sometimes they can genuinely overlook it and move on. However, often times, they overlook it only to grow bitter and angry in their hearts. Such resentment tends to grow and fester and come out later. Some authors who write on "spiritual abuse" maintain that this first step is not necessary when a pastor is "unsafe." For example, if a pastor is accused of sexual-abuse, the woman may rightly feel intimidated that the pastor may use his influence and authority to cover up his sin by accusing her of some minor offense and slandering her name amongst the congregation. Many such examples could be given. In such cases, it would be entirely appropriate for the woman to take her husband along to confront the pastor. Afterall, they are a one-flesh couple. Still other authors say that some people won't confront their pastor because they are intimidated by him or for some other fear (real or imagined). While there are extreme situations that may provide an exception, we must remember that confronting sin in anyone's life is an exceedingly difficult thing. How much more the pastor's alleged sin? But excuses of "intimidation" need to be tempered. I'm sure that Esther was intimidated to confront King Ahasuerus. After all, he wielded great power, and he could have ended her life if he so wished. But Esther's resolution was

"If I perish, I perish!" Pastors, no doubt, need to be approachable. And this is something that is more of a challenge to some than others. But the congregation must also accept their responsibility to address their pastors with courage if they believe they are in sin.

If the pastor and the accuser do not agree, the accuser has the right to take two or three witnesses with them to confront the pastor again, according to Matthew 18. Please note, these need not be "witnesses" to the sin of the pastor. While that would be perfectly appropriate, the "witnesses" are there to witness the confrontation so that they can report to the congregation if it goes before the church. If, after this meeting, the pastor does not acknowledge any wrong-doing and the accuser is still convinced that he is in sin, then the accuser and the witnesses must go to the elders to adjudicate the matter. In Reformed Baptist polity, "tell it to the church" first requires that the elders have heard the case and find enough merit in it to bring it to the congregation. If, upon bringing the matter to the elders, the elders judge that the pastor is in unrepentant sin, he should be rebuked before the congregation through church discipline.

However, if, when the accuser and witnesses bring the matter to the elders, the elders judge that the witnesses have lied, or do not have enough evidence and have therefore levied an unsubstantiated charge against the elder, the accuser and witnesses are now confronted with their sin. If they repent of their false witness, forgiveness should be granted, and the matter is dropped. But if they persist in their false allegations, which usually involves lobbying the rest of the congregation to their cause through gossip and slander, then the elders must pursue charges against the false witnesses and rebuke them in the presence of the congregation. The refusal to publicly rebuke false witnesses, whether out of fear, or a superficial peace, sets a precedent in the church that false allegations against a minister are "par for the course" and "acceptable" in the life of a congregation. This precedent will sow fertile seeds of suspicion and distrust of ministers and ultimately diminish the power and authority of the preached Word. Samuel Pearce understood this well. He understood that ministers

are "gifts" to the church, and their reputation and character are to be guarded. In an ordination sermon for a man named R. Belsher, Pearce said this to the congregation:

> You will find it necessary, not only to guard yourselves against entertaining any unbecoming sentiments of your minister, but also to discountenance every appearance of it in others. For one complaining, dissatisfied member in a religious society, if encouraged by the rest, will be like poison in the blood, or the leaven in the meal which secretly but effectually insinuates itself, until the whole mass be contaminated. "Mark them," says the apostle, "who cause divisions among you, and avoid them; for they gratify their own passions, but serve not our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 16:17–18). Such persons will assume the spirit of zeal and pretend concern for the truth, but "by their fruits you shall know them" (Matthew 7:20); and when they are discovered, unless they give the sincerest proofs of penitence, let them be put from the church, as the leper from the camp, lest they defile all who come near them.[16]

The onus to properly adjudicate an accusation is seen in v. 21 where Paul charges Timothy in the presence of God, Jesus Christ, and the elect angels to show no partiality. In the Deuteronomy 19 text, the purpose of the three witnesses of Lord, priests, and judges is to judge the truthfulness of the witnesses. In 1 Timothy 5, the purpose is to guarantee impartiality in the judicial process.[17] J. W. Fuller says this:

> In both passages a fair examination can only be conducted on the basis of the testimony of "two or three witnesses." But no less of

16. Samuel Pearce, *Selected Works of Samuel Pearce*, with Chance Faulkner (Peterborough, Ontario: H & E Publishing, 2022), 146–47.

17. J. W. Fuller, "Of Elders and Triads in 1 Timothy 5:19–25," *New Testament Studies* 29 (1983): 262.

> a fair examination awaits the examiner, for he in turn has "three witnesses" to determine how well he has carried out his appointed task. Certainly having "God, Christ Jesus, and the elect angels" for witnesses at one's "trial" ought to have made Timothy, and ought to make a congregation and its pastor, careful about how they conduct disciplinary matters in the church![18]

When the congregation adjudicates a church discipline case, Jesus Christ is there in their midst confirming it with his own authority. This should cause everyone in the congregation to proceed with the utmost caution and fear. We are talking about someone's reputation and dignity. Our Particular Baptist forefathers understood this well by confessing in the First London Baptist Confession of Faith (1646) article 43: "And every particular member of each church, how excellent, great, or learned soever, is subject to this censure and judgment; and that the church ought not without great care and tenderness, and due advice, but by the rule of faith, to proceed against her members."

The moment members or ministers go outside the bounds of Matthew 18:15–20, church order is lost, and the people of God are left to their own fleshly devices. I've seen it time and time again where members believe that their unbiblical methods of dealing with conflict are justified. I confronted a man who was gossiping about the elders, and he told me candidly that he believed that "the ends justified the means." This is the attitude that we must guard against. It is the protocol of agendas, not restoration. The congregation needs to remember the words of our Lord: "with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you" (Matt. 7:2). Gossip and slander may seem like the expedient thing to do against a pastor or member but remember, the same thing will happen to you. In other words, "Treat others as you would have them treat you."

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18. Fuller, "Of Elders and Triads in 1 Timothy 5:19–25," 262.

Some Practical Application

Allow me to give four practical applications to elders in local churches. First, when hearing charges against anyone, we must judge on evidence, not emotion or irrational fears. Two or three witnesses is one thing. But two or three witnesses whose story is not corroborated does not apply. Nor does the testimony of two or three witnesses who were offended that the pastor confronted their sin. The evidence must be substantial. Furthermore, the witnesses must come forward themselves rather than having their "testimony" repeated by someone else. Often times people bringing charges against an elder (or others) will say things like "a lot of people are saying." This doesn't necessarily mean anything and should be inadmissible in the court of the church. The apostle Paul experienced the same intrigue and deception against him by the Scribes and Pharisees when he stood before Felix in Acts 24:19, 20. He responded to second-hand accusations by saying: "[my accusers] ought to be here before you and to make an accusation, should they have anything against me. Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council…" I have found that most people will not say to your face what they say around and about you. And such accusations should be inadmissible in the court of the church.

Second, deal swiftly and forthrightly with divisive people in your congregation. Paul exhorts Titus "as for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned" (Tit. 3:10–11). One of the biggest mistakes I've made is exercising naivete toward gossips and slanderers. I've confronted them and they lied to me, but I foolishly wanted to believe they were telling me the truth (1 Cor. 13:7). Only after they had caused irreparable damage and left did I find out what they were doing. Pastors must be proactive in addressing chatter. If it walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it's probably a duck. Paul told Titus not to mess around but to warn once, twice, and then have nothing to do with them.

That doesn't mean "avoid them *in* the church." You can't avoid leaven that leavens the whole lump. This is church discipline language. You must bring the power of the keys against them. Pastors will inevitably be charged with 'spiritual abuse' by the naysayers. There is no way around it. The culture of victimhood has seeped into the sub-culture of the church. And our knee-jerk reaction is to fear what man may do to our reputation. But we must care more about the well-being of the flock than our own reputation. I know that that is a hard pill to swallow, especially because it is never just your reputation that suffers but also the reputation of our families. But having called you to the ministry, the Lord will grant grace to you and your family to endure the affliction.

Charles Spurgeon was the object of much abuse, slander, gossip, and character assassination. Being human, he, like us, had to wrestle through the ongoing and creative attempts to tarnish his character. In his biography on Spurgeon, Arnold Dallimore notes that the "opposition [toward Spurgeon] taught him to sacrifice even his reputation for Christ."[19] Spurgeon himself said in his autobiography, "If I must lose [my reputation] too, then let it go; it is the dearest thing I have, but it shall go too, if, like my Master, they shall say I have a devil and am mad."[20] Dallimore continues, "The experience, heartrending though it was at the time, brought him into an increased maturity, and it was a wiser Spurgeon who led his church forward."[21]

Third, stop the mouth of roving malicious witnesses through ecclesial cooperation. If a malicious witness who has been judged by his/her former congregation or elders to be in the wrong comes to your church and spreads his/her lies, refuse to accept his/her testimony without talking to the office-bearers of the former congregation. To

19. See Arnold A. Dallimore, *Spurgeon* (Moody Press, 1984), 72.

20. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography*, Revised edition, with Susannah Spurgeon and Joseph Harrald, 1: The Early Years (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1962), 304.

21. Dallimore, *Spurgeon*, 72.

the degree that you shelter divisive people, your congregation will be contaminated, and you will give a false assurance to the divisive man that he is ok. Particular Baptist Associationalism is about more than holding communion together, it is equally about guarding other churches from divisive people.

Finally, we must teach our people about the sinful danger of gossip, slander, and meddling. I have seen the lingering effect of gossip, slander, and meddling cause members to gradually leave a congregation years after the fact. Why does that happen? Because trust in their pastors has deteriorated. Pastors must be more *proactive* than *reactive* in shepherding our people how to think about it. Any attempt to undermine genuine biblical efforts of shepherding God's people is meddling. To be specific, I am here thinking about shepherding and counseling *interference.* I am thinking specifically about pastors confronting sin in their people's lives rather than offering counsel in matters of Christian liberty that they can take or leave. People who are dissatisfied with a pastor's sin-confronting efforts will often go to others in the congregation and share their disgruntlement. Those who listen to these disgruntlements will do one of two things. First, they will either believe a one-sided report and spread a narrative around the congregation based on that report. Or, second, they will try and speak to the pastor about the kind of "counsel" he is giving to this member. This, of course, puts the pastor in a very difficult position since he is expected to guard pastor-parishioner confidentiality. In these cases, I have told members who were seeking more details that I could not share anything with them but that if they wanted to come in as an advocate with the disgruntled member and that member gave me permission to share "the rest of the story," that I would be willing to do that. But apart from that, I needed to maintain confidentiality. Proverbs 26:17 says, "Whoever meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears." The apostle Peter exhorts Christians "…but let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler" (1 Pet. 4:15). The Greek word for "meddler," ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος, is a combination of two words: "ἀλλότριος," which

means "to what belongs to another" and "επίσκοπος" which means "bishop." Etymologically, this word means something like "to act as a bishop over another." We see this very usage in Epictetus where he cites the claims of cynic preachers to be overseers of all men.[22] The word eventually came to refer to "one who meddles in a matter that does not pertain to him." The Lord has called elders to be overseers in the congregation. The congregation, as a unified body, has veto-power over the elders, but individual members and groups of disgruntled members do not.

My mentor once told me that it is much more challenging to be a pastor today than it was for him 25 years ago. The culture at large exudes deep suspicion of those in authority, and this mentality has crept into the church. But we ought not fear as if the Lord has not equipped us with his Word to handle the peculiar challenges of our generation. God is faithful and calls his ministers to be faithful. Regardless of the scrutiny and character assassination one may endure, the faithful servant of the Lord Jesus Christ will stand as a backstop to sin, naysayers, malicious witnesses, unrepentant office-bearers, and even his own doubts, fears, and misgivings.

22. See BDAG, s.v., "ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος." Epictetus. 3:22, 97: *οὐ τὰ ἀλλότρια πολυπραγμονεῖ ὅταν τὰ ἀνθρώπινα ἐπισκοπῇ ἀλλὰ τὰ ἴδια.*"