

THE PASTORS' PEN

articles from the elders of BBC

Recently I was listening to the Neil Young song *After the Goldrush*. I'm always struck by one lyric: "I was thinking about what a friend had said, I was hoping it was a lie."

I don't know what Mr. Young had in mind. Was he referring to some bad news he heard *from* a friend? Perhaps he was referring to something bad that a friend had said *about* him? When the latter is the case, we share Neil Young's concern: We hope that the report about the friend's words "was a lie." The alternative is too painful to bear. But sometimes we must bear it. Sometimes, we must do the painful thing of confronting someone we love to ascertain whether or not the report we heard is true. And if it is, we need to deal with it—constructively. To hope for the best is one thing; to deny reality is another altogether. The former is to be encouraged; the latter is to be avoided. This is important in all relationships, but it is extremely important when it comes to reports of sin in the congregation of the local church.

When such a report is heard, the congregation is mandated by God to do something about it. We can hope that it is lie, but it is our duty to find out if our hope is legitimate. If it is not, then we—the congregation—must act. This is one of our congregational responsibilities, having being given the keys to the kingdom (Matthew 16:19; 18:18–20).

In the previous article I argued that Jesus Christ gives to the congregation (the members of a local church) the authority to both admit into membership and to dismiss

from church membership. I emphasised the admission aspect of this authority. In this article, I want to address the difficult duty of walking the path of congregational discipline with a church member—discipline that might end up in congregational dismissal. We might call such a duty "congregational confrontation."

The local church has been gifted by God with leadership—a biblically-qualified,

plural eldership. The scriptures provide the sobering mandate that elders are to protect the flock from false teaching and from sinful behaviour. Paul put it succinctly when he wrote that those

leading the church are to instruct the church to behave in a manner worthy of our calling as members of the church (1 Timothy 3:14–16). Elders are entrusted with this responsibility. And one way they fulfil it is by equipping the *congregation* to do *its* job, which, like the eldership, includes the responsibility to protect the church from sinful, destructive, Christ-dishonouring behaviour.

One way the elders do this is by grounding the congregation in the *gospel*. As church members are well catechised in the gospel, they are empowered to wisely examine the testimonies of those who desire to join the congregation. By properly narrowing the front door of church membership—to those who have a



credible profession of faith (evidenced partly by a covenantal commitment to serve the body of Christ)—the congregation thereby guards the church. But once someone is admitted, what is the congregation's responsibility? It is simple: to guard the purity of the church. That is, to guard its character, which is holiness (Ephesians 5:25–27; 1 Peter 1:15–17). This is where the congregation is called upon to confront sinning church members. This is where the congregation is called upon to fulfil its duty to compassionately and constructively correct sinning church members. This is where the congregation is called upon to show its care for sinning church members. Such action provides practical care for the congregation as a whole. Elders are called to equip members to do this—their job!

Elders are to teach God's word, in various ways, so as to equip the congregation with a corporate commitment to holiness. Elders are to shepherd in such a way that the congregation is committed to going after wandering sheep and doing what it can to bring them home. Elders are to shepherd the flock towards a comprehensive concern for each member of the flock. And this includes teaching the congregation what God expects of those who are members of his church—as well as the consequences if we stray from his expectations.

When the congregation, by God's word, is grounded in these responsibilities, it is equipped to do its job of confronting those who sin (Matthew 18:15); is equipped to bring along others as witnesses if the church member does not repent (Matthew 18:16); and is equipped to deal with this matter publicly and corporately if the church member persists in their sin (Matthew 18:17a). But, you might ask, what if the church member continues in his rebellion? What if he will not turn away from his sin? Well, some would answer, "The pastors then must deal with the matter!" Wrong.

It is interesting that there is no mention of church leaders in this passage on church discipline. On the contrary, the assumption is that each church member individually, and the membership corporately, will pursue a sinning church member. They begin by hoping for the best and, like Neil Young, hope that what perhaps they heard was a lie. If not, they confront again, with witnesses, so that every word may be established (2 Corinthians 13:1). If there is no response, then the entire congregation is informed—not to spread the news, but rather to save a soul. If there is still no repentance, then the congregation removes the member from the local church.

Again, though the elders will usually lead the congregation in this action, please don't miss the point that it is the congregation that dismisses members from the covenantal bonds of fellowship (see Matthew 18:17b). Jesus affirmed this congregational authority when he said, *"Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them"* (18:18–20). Jesus was saying that, when the congregation follows the orders of heaven (as revealed in this passage), heaven respects the decision of the congregation. The matter of admitting someone to membership (loosing) is a blessed responsibility. The matter of dismissing someone from membership (binding) is a burdensome responsibility. It is a burden because, though we have wanted to believe the best, in the end we have had to conclude the worst. And yet Jesus promised his blessings for the congregation that is willing to shoulder such a burden. That blessing is in the form of his blessed presence (Matthew 18:20).

In summary, the congregation is entrusted by Christ, and is to be equipped by biblical elders, to discipline its fellow members—even sometimes to the point of dismissing them from church membership. That is sobering; that is serious; that is the scriptural position. May God give us grace to do our job on earth, with his blessing from heaven.

