

BRINGING LIGHT IN—WHY?

In *Win Bigly*, Scott Adams turns to Donald Trump. He describes what makes the president a master persuader. He defines master persuaders as those who “move your energy to the topics that help them, independent of facts and reason.” Adams shows us how “facts are weaker than fiction” in our day and age: “If you have ever tried to talk someone out of their political beliefs by providing facts, you know it doesn’t work. That’s because people think they have their own facts. Better facts. And if they know they don’t have better facts, they change the subject. People are not easily switched from one political opinion to another. And facts are weak persuasion. So Trump ignores facts whenever they are inconvenient. I know you don’t want to think this works in terms of persuasion. But it does.”

I am not one of these master persuaders. I believe that the evidence will speak for itself. When evidence is presented about sin in my life, it stings. The power of the Holy Spirit in me leads me through the wilderness to find repentance. But I am not good at articulating the struggle, or the fight, or the victory. I am not a master persuader.

One of the things that Trump does is to label things for you, to get you thinking about what he wants you to think about regardless of what is truly important, to get you focusing on secondary matters rather than the main issue.

I have not controlled the narrative I present here. I have sinned by allowing others to control and label what something is and is not. I have let others define the agenda, the timelines, the actions. I have been distracted by secondary matters and have been paralyzed by fear. There is no personal gain or benefit to me by bringing this all up to you. I am not after someone’s job.

I want to be able to sleep at night. I want to be able to speak of the gospel with power. I want to be able to live in freedom. I don’t want to hide. I don’t want to be tormented.

In an elders meeting earlier this year, I was about to illustrate a point I was making by sharing the impact of Zach Eswine’s book *The Imperfect Pastor* to me during the days prior to the meeting, and I was told by my former pastor that I have an input/output problem—not reading books for two years was spoken to me as part of the solution.

I cannot even write that sentence without doubting myself. You see, I remember it being an edict, a command, *the* solution. I recall it being spoken to me abrasively and decisively. It is my understanding that both of my former pastors present at that meeting testify that it was not an edict but rather a suggestion.

This little exchange affected me deeply because I love to read. I also idolize reading from time to time, I must own that. It’s idolizing in those times when I believe the lie that it is easier to sit down and hide behind a book than to actually deal with these big problems. At that time, I had been alone and isolated in many ways for several months, and I was desperate for answers, reading what I could to make sense of the situation. The idea/command to close my books was a shock to my soul—some of it righteous, some of it idolatrous, but shocking nonetheless. What I had wanted to show was how Eswine would have been helpful to us where we were as an eldership at the time—he is quite frank and honest with the reality of being *human* pastors grasping at omnipotence, believing the lie of the enemy that we can be like God.

But I never got to that—I was redirected. Now I was on the hot seat: produce more, read less. I continue to maintain that it was a directive though it is challenged and it undermines my credibility from the start. I chose to remain silent and keep this event out of conversations and

proceedings about the larger problems because I thought it wouldn't be helpful to bring up disputed charges when there is a mountain of evidence.

Chris Cuomo in one of his monologues about the Trump impeachment hearings presented a very powerful phrase: "They can deny the charges. Their problem is they cannot disprove them."

I absolutely dislike doing this. I have found at least one reason every day since May 2018 to do nothing about it. I am neither a master persuader nor a master manipulator. I have hidden in my home, I have kept this quiet. I have called it by polite names. I have sought to do what I was told to do—to be a *guardian* of my *brother's reputation* as he was a guardian of mine. I have taught myself to and have led my wife to speak about the *thing* without really saying anything about it. Yet, I keep waking up in the wee hours of the morning. I have no rest. This idea that has been clearly communicated to me for years that *wise* men don't do this sort of disclosure has been very powerful in keeping me quiet. But,

"Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them." (Eph 5:11)

PETER'S BETRAYAL

I was recently studying Mark 14. Note that Peter's betrayal of the Lord Christ was not a random event or a slip of the tongue—Jesus predicted it, and Peter *did* betray the Lord not just once but three times. This came as Judas was setting the wheels in motion for what would be Jesus' crucifixion. Yet, the Lord was faithful through Peter's unfaithfulness—immediately after predicting his betrayal, rather than getting rid of him or causing him harm, Jesus invites Peter to stay up, keep watch with him as he prayed in Gethsemane. Peter was part of one of the last, most intimate prayer moments of the Lord Jesus on earth. While the Lord is praying that marvelous John 17 prayer for us, for you and I, Peter fails three times to keep watch. He keeps falling asleep. He seems to be unaware of the weight of what is happening. He is not able to stay up and pray without ceasing—he's not even able to keep his eyes open—. *There is no sense of urgency*. The betrayal becomes a reality as the disciples do scatter and Peter does betray the Lord three times to people of no renown. Peter's fear is of such magnitude that he doesn't betray Jesus to the Sanhedrin or to the High Priest or to a Roman official. He betrays the Lord to people whose names history has not preserved—a servant girl and some bystanders.

Yet, after rising up from the dead, Jesus does not treat Peter as he would deserve. Instead, the relationship is made whole—there is complete restoration. Look at the end of John.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "*Feed my lambs*." He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "*Tend my sheep*." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "*Feed my sheep*" (John 21:15-17 ESV).

Betrayed not once but three times *yet* commissioned not once but three times. That's the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to bring about complete restoration. I long for *that*.

This is what we have in mind when we present to you what we are bringing into the light. Peter's colossal failure was not the last act in this narrative. Peter's repentance and the Lord's restoration of Peter are the early chapters of the history of the glorious Church of Jesus Christ that will not ultimately fail but will proclaim the gospel of the kingdom until the earth is full of the glory of the Lord.

This is not a slanderous spin of a series of events into their worst possible light. This is not a slanderous manipulation of a person's motives taken in the worst possible way. These events happened. I have no interest in going into areas of speculation—what the motives were, what the intent was, what must have been inside of the people involved. When a child breaks a window in a neighbor's house, the window has to be repaired. It doesn't matter if it was an accident, if the child was negligent, if the child was clumsy, or if the child had been maliciously planning everything for days and executed his plans perfectly. The window must be repaired.

The other element, the more subjective element, does matter. But the window was broken. We deal with that first. Yet, in one of several conversations we had with our former pastor trying to restore our relationship, he explained that restitution was more nuanced—that the restitution Zacchaeus promised, for example, was for merely financial matters, thus issues of anger are not in the same category for restitution.

And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, *I restore it fourfold*." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:8-10)

This is not a slanderous spin of a series of unfortunate events taken into the worst possible description of them. In other words, this is not an issue of perspective. There are facts that can be denied but cannot be disproved.

/ AM PETER

A couple of advents ago I preached a sermon titled "I am Peter." My point was that the so-called "war on Christmas" is not merely an outward war, a conflict over whether to say Merry Christmas or not—an *us versus them*. The Christmas war is an inward war. We get ourselves so concerned about the war without that we forget to fight the war within. We see in the text Peter betraying Jesus. The heart of the Christmas war is not about semantics and about forcing a Christ-less civilization to sing of a Christ they despise: the heart of the Christmas war is about obliterating the remains of the sin in my regenerate heart. Blow up the gigantic oak branch coming out of my eye before I try to take the speck out of my brother's eye. That is, to make a right judgment.

That is what is in mind as I write this—no human being is able to point at Peter without having three fingers pointing at himself. That's the case for me as well. I have betrayed the Lord Jesus.

This is not easy to write. But complete restoration is something that we see in the Word not only as desirable but as something very possible to our generous Father, and we *know* that all things are possible for Him (Mark 14:36).

Join me in a prayer I read to my wife many years ago from Gloria Furman's *The Pastor's Wife*:

Paul [...] wrote in Phil 1:12: "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel."

Grace flips my timid prayer [...] on its head to read this way instead:

Friends, pray with us in this hardship because God will show himself to be faithful beyond the shadow of a doubt. And we want to be ready to praise him in all things together with you.

Amen!

Why? Because what has happened to us must serve to *advance* the gospel.

Why? Because God has shown Himself and will show Himself to be faithful beyond the shadow of a doubt in this horrible ordeal.

Why? Because God will get all the glory and all the praise.

A NOTE TO MY FRIEND WHO IS NOT YET A BELIEVER IN JESUS

One of the reasons I did not want to do this at first is the same reason why this all happened—a wrong belief deep inside of my flesh that you will definitely reject the gospel because of what has happened. I have believed that speaking honestly about sin will definitely, certainly, and ultimately turn away those who do not yet believe in Jesus and leave them there, ultimately cast out from the best news of the gospel.

However, the Word puts these fears to death. Grace flips this nonsense back to what is true. Believers must take sin seriously so that you, my dear friend, can see that we are not some fake, holier than thou pontificate that judges your sins as worse than ours. The charges of hypocrisy are so easy to make against us, Christians. And they are also the easiest for Christians to ignore. Christ did not come into the world, lived a perfect life of obedience, died a brutal death on our behalf, and rose again to glory leaving us true hope so that a whole bunch of people would have free rein to be hypocrites about the gospel.

Repentance is impossible without the grace and empowering of God. He is able and powerful to open your eyes, ears, heart, soul, and mind to see him and serve him with all your strength.

And that the purpose of this anyway: to bring about repentance. I truly do look forward to worshiping Christ for all eternity by your side. So, know this—I am still calling you to turn to Christ and have eternal life in Him. My love for you remains the same, and the passion to engage with you where you are remains the same.

In moments like the ones when I'm writing this, after the conscience wakes you up, when there is no sound distracting you, no lights, no Netflix, no to-do list, when there is nowhere to run, **the gospel truly is the only narrative that makes sense of it all, and it is only the gospel that gives us confidence to face the sin and hang on for dear life until we see Christ fulfill his promises.**

In simple terms, I have not found a more compelling and wholesome narrative that is superior to the gospel to not just process the events we present here but also to bring about true restoration. Secular thought invites us to just let it go because time will help it all go away. Secular thought has helped me to become impatient and angry—why isn't this fixed? What can I do to just get it to stop?

The silencing of the conscience is a dangerous business that I do not have a desire to continue to do. That would require the death of my relationship with Jesus because something must be done about the conscience to keep it quiet. It is either to self-medicate or to allow my heart to be hardened, to be further desensitized from the power of the Word of God.

It is only through repentance that the guilty soul can be made free. I do not have any interest in allowing the Bible to lose its sharpness to penetrate through my core and give me life. I do not have any interest in turning the Bible into a useless spatula that just sits in the kitchen utensil drawer not good to cut through my meat. After all, repentance may just be around the corner.

THE CULTURE THAT WAS BUILT

In one of the most disheartening conversations I had with my former pastor, I was put in my place. I was reminded that he is the culture builder, that he is the one who took all the risks, all the costs, all the hardships, all the difficulty. He is the founder—that's how he put it. He built the culture. I am a manager. I come with low risk, with risk aversion, I don't have to leave my secular employment, I don't have to live in the harder parts of the city, I can just parachute in and leave when it's time to go home.

There is truth to the fact that he took risks and losses. But the culture that we built has to be explored. It is not just that *he* alone built it. I also built it through action, participation, inaction, permissiveness, and assent.

At this point, and before I get to a narrative of what happened, I do want to put forward some tenets of the culture that was built. As the story is told, you can see the places where these cultural elements arise:

- A culture of secrecy and isolation (to be a pastor is to be lonely)
- A culture of self-preservation (how can the church survive x event?)
- A culture where optics are first (what will people think about this?)
- A culture of living in the works of the flesh (an unfiltered, unguarded, unholy way of speaking about sin, the sheep, and ourselves)
- A culture of bypassing the authority of the local church (pragmatism)
- A culture of taking the place of God Almighty in the sheep's lives
- A culture of shame and shaming
- A culture of bullying, blame-shifting, and belittling once you are not walking within the lines
- A culture of manipulation and abuse

Were there positive elements to the culture that was built? How is this not a hyper negative spin of the work of many years?

Yes, there were very many sweet moments, there were ways in which the community we lived together was sweet and glorious. Some of the best moments of my life were lived in fellowship with the sheep we have loved and cared about. Yet, under all of the goodness and the visible good, there were these underlying tenets that would spike up from time to time. Somebody would leave the church, but it would always be on them—so and so is weak, has an aversion to institutions, has a problem with authority...

There would be some degree to which the community felt like a group that had an impenetrable inner circle of holiness that was not attainable by most. Stepping out of that circle would unleash all sorts of consequences, shame and shaming, being blamed for it, being known by your weaknesses and sins, being alone and left alone, and being persuaded that it was you. And to the outsider, there was no way into that circle.

I did not really see it. And then it happened to me.

I was just recently reminded of one of C. S. Lewis' letters where he writes, "I am rather sick of the modern assumption that, for all events, "WE", the people, are never responsible: it is always our rulers, or ancestors, or parents, or education, or anybody but precious "US". WE are apparently perfect and blameless. Don't you believe it."

Am I saying this is *all* my former pastor's fault? Absolutely not. **I am responsible as well.** I start with that—I own this. I repent of this. I want to repent of whatever is not here that needs repentance. I am neither perfect nor blameless. I am redeemed, but I am not blameless. That's why my Savior needed to go to a brutal cross to die for me. This is not a story of how *I* was wronged; this is a narrative of wrong. And I trust in God that it will be a narrative of wrong made right.

OUR STORY: HOW WE GOT HERE

You know how oversimplification works. But also I understand "too long, didn't read" is a real thing, and I have already exceeded most readers' interest due to length. I also know that I can take forever to tell stories.

So, here is what happened:

- I came to know about Christ when I was in college, but I didn't really come to *know* Christ until my sin really hit rock bottom when I was living in St. Louis for work.
- I was convicted by the preaching of the Word of God to repent and turn to Christ, and I did. Joy was finally something possible, something I could see in Christ.
- During one of his sermons, the then-pastor of a large St. Louis area church that became my home for years, who is not the man I am writing this document about, introduced the biblical idea of idolatry to me. It was very foreign, very new to my ears. One of his points was that *idolatry of acceptance* was a serious problem for many people, and he was describing me perfectly. It was so scary, but I knew from that day forward that I would need to battle against this in the power of Christ. What do I mean by that? I mean that when it matters, other people's opinion of me, their acceptance of me, their approval of me, matters more to me than anything else in the world, even the Lord Christ. So, if you were to put on one side of a scale my love for Christ and my love for the acceptance of people on the other, many times the idol wins.
- I had written marriage off as a possibility for my life, and I was enjoying serving the Lord at my local church when I met the love of my life and married her. We chose that we would leave Clayton and go into the Metro East together to what was then her church. We served there for a number of years. I remember the sweet uncomfortableness of being called by the Lord to go there to serve Him, and I had the privilege and joy of being one of the pastors of this sweet, precious flock won by the blood of Christ.
- Almost three years ago, my wife and I responded to a need in the Kansas City area. Our house had just sold after being in the market for two years, and we decided to move our family from the St. Louis Metro East to Johnson County, Kansas, to be part of a local church there that was in need as they had just gone through the heartbreak of losing their pastor because of sin.
- Moving on its own shook loose all kinds of things that were there but that hadn't been shaken in quite some time. Shortly after our move, my wife and I faced the premature death of our son Gideon in Kansas in December of 2017.
- My wife was grieving, and in her grief she was angry with God and doubting his goodness and generosity.

- Going through grief and loss is hard. In addition to that, we were in the middle of moving and struggling with having nothing that was familiar to us while working to figuring out how to serve the local church as we were adjusting to our new life.
- After Gideon's death and all the way through April of 2018, my wife was not in a good place spiritually. She was really struggling, and I did not really know how to help her. I failed her. I allowed the busyness of the business of my life—both in my work and the church—in my sin to distract me from caring well for my wife. I did not really avail myself of resources or help.
- I was feeling the heat. On the one hand, I perceived that my wife was not happy. For a man with a tendency to betray his Lord for the idol of acceptance, you can see how that can bring great discontentment. I sinfully took what my wife was going through as a rejection of me, of my help, of the Lord. I was a very discontented man during that season.
- On the other hand, my wife was in plain view of the local church as well. Though I had started my ordination process with the denomination long before moving to Kansas or having lost Gideon and I came to Kansas with no expectations of being called to be a pastor by this local church, that ordination process was ongoing. I was being evaluated. We were being evaluated. In her grief, my wife was visibly upset and sad in sight of the congregation when we gathered for worship on Sundays.
- I was having conversations with my pastor where my wife's lack of joy was brought up to me as a concern and counseling was recommended in several occasions. I had this idea that counseling meant admitting failure, or perhaps more accurately, I saw counseling as a sharp indictment telling me that I was incapable of helping my wife. Whichever way it was, I became paralyzed and dissatisfied with the Lord—I looked to my left and my wife looked unhappy and that didn't seem like it was going to change anytime soon, and I looked to my right and my pastor would complain about my wife's lack of joy and recommend all sorts of things: a vasectomy, adoption, counseling, asserting more control in the home, reevaluating my wife as my children's primary teacher. I was challenged of having built fake shalom in my home, the appearance of godliness. I was told that my home had been flooded and was full of mold, and I was treating the situation as a normal cleaning or painting job instead of a gut-wrenching obliteration of all that was broken.
- Having been affirmed by the congregation and called to be their pastor, we traveled to Minnesota at the beginning of May of last year for the regional gathering of elders for our denomination with our pastor and his wife. We drove together. The trip up was uneventful. A unanimous vote was taken on my ordination by the regional elders, and when we gathered as elders to discuss how we were doing, we were transparent in that it had been the hardest year of our life facing all sorts of loss. My wife cried while sharing where we were.
- After the elders gathering, there was a marriage conference. We attended it and were greatly encouraged by it. A number of friends from our local church came up as well, so it was a very enjoyable time. Yet, I could tell my wife was struggling. You go to a marriage conference, and you'll find all kinds of newlyweds there, and with them come pregnant newlyweds and little babies. The due date for Gideon was approaching. My wife was really struggling. She cried a lot.
- We went to church on Sunday to hear our pastor preach there after the retreat, and after an enjoyable lunch with the pastor of the church that hosted us, we started to return back to Kansas.
- On the road, my wife shared that the song *Rejoice* was particularly helpful to her during the conference. It was the first time, she reported, that she had not heard a call to rejoice as something trite and distant, as a platitude. She was encouraged by that song to rejoice with trembling and even with tears in her eyes because her Savior will help her sing, "Rejoice." This was a testimony of God's work in her during the conference.
- A little later my wife brought up in conversation that she was wondering how to take the welcome she had received from other moms at the church to playdates and similar events

and extend it to moms outside of the church. We had been talking for a number of years about the idea of the ingrown church, and she had a fair question to ask—we have all these wonderful playdates, this great fellowship together, why not extend this outside of the walls of the local church?

OUR STORY: THE TURNING POINT OF EVENTS

- At that point, our pastor who was driving the vehicle, responded to my wife in a harsh and loud way.
- A lot happened in there, and it is still hard for me to process it all. It sounds ridiculous—how can a man who can remember what page something was in a book he read ten years ago not be able to give an exact account of what happened? How can a man who can tell you what you said in a conversation that didn't have great relevance now find himself in emotional turmoil trying to remember what was actually said and not? As a matter of fact, I have used that as an excuse for all this time to not really speak about this. I have allowed myself to chicken out from really dealing with what happened in that car. I have called it being gracious, seeking to give double honor to my pastor, trying to not keep a record of wrongs.
- My pastor had recommended in the past that I would get a vasectomy. My wife has a history of miscarriages, and we have been dealing with the medical side of miscarriage one way or another pretty much since we got married. Our son Timothy was born and died very shortly after we were first married, just short of four months of marriage.
- I didn't push back during those conversations with my pastor. I did find it to be something I wasn't interested in doing as I believed it would proclaim an anti-gospel message to my wife, a message of hopelessness and to me it was like not trusting God. So, I never took this suggestion to my wife. I am now aware that he was left with the impression that I was having conversations about the vasectomy with my wife.
- During this very volatile event in the car, our pastor brought up the vasectomy as something that should have been done long ago. My wife was rebuked for her lack of joy and told that she had no business asking about bringing other moms into the church until she had joy.
- This may all seem off to you immediately. Some of you may have questions about authority all over this. To me, it wasn't off or suspicious, or shocking. That's how long I'd been swimming in these waters thinking this is all normal.
- I have found that people are quick to attribute much of what happened to past trauma in my wife's life, to present trauma in our life together, to hormones during pregnancy, to her activism for causes like the pro-life movement, to mental illness due to trauma, to PTSD.
- In that car, in light of erratic driving and visible anger from our former pastor, my wife asked me to do something about this, but I turned her down. Instead, I dismissed her concerns and told her to listen to him. While I may not have liked the tone or where this conversation was going or how it was being handled, I just *knew* that this was necessary, and that our pastor was right and would have a trustworthy word or guide to offer.

It is awful to write of my own sin and of my neglect to care well for my wife. But that's part of how we got here.

My wife was verbally and spiritually abused in that vehicle, and I did not do anything to protect her. Instead, I participated in the abuse by asking her to remain quiet and listen, dismissing her concerns. I allowed my wife to be in harm's way.

OUR STORY: THE ISOLATION—ISOLATED AND ISOLATING FROM THE LOCAL CHURCH

The first person that my wife asked to help her was me.

In that car, I sinned in failing to protect my wife.

You may wonder why did I fail to protect her? Part of the story could be the fear of man. I definitely did not want to face my pastor in that moment. This sin is to fear people more than I fear God, and I am guilty of it. Yet I don't think it's the primary reason for my failure to protect my wife.

Part of the story is cowardice that results in inaction. But there is another part to this that is not as neatly categorized but that is *the* reason behind all other reasons: it's the idea that when it happened I just *knew* that my pastor was right. My disposition was to side with him.

My disposition was that he was right to yell at my wife and to address me and his own wife harshly in that car. My disposition was that doing this while he was driving down the interstate was an expression of his profound care and love for us. My disposition was that he loved us so much that we needed to listen and do as directed. My disposition was that it was good for my wife to sit there and continue to listen. My disposition was to ignore things in plain sight—erratic driving, angry behavior, grooming, shaming, forcefulness. And yet, it was all on my wife in my mind—if she would just listen well...

Unfortunately, this is not the first time this had happened. It was the first time that it happened to us.

My former pastor's wife came to our home the following night—not him, just her. In this conversation (in which I was not present), it is my understanding that it was reinforced that my wife witnessed a manifestation of our former pastor's love for her. There was no sign of repentance towards my wife. My wife rejected the equating of the abuse she went through with love. From that night forward my wife and her friend of almost two decades would not have the same relationship again.

As a result of this conversation, partly because of my attempts to meddle in to try to mediate the situation (a terrible idea and an action full of control idolatry itself), but not solely because of that, my former pastor and my wife would never again have a right relationship with one another despite efforts to reconcile from my wife. In that car she was told she had everything she needed to become the next Rachael Denhollander. This needs to be understood clearly: my wife and I both knew in unequivocal terms, kind of like the code red in *A Few Good Men*, that what went on in that car ought not to be spoken of to anyone.

We did not tell a soul.

I had to get up in the morning, go to seminary, go to work, come back home, have these awful conversations where my wife couldn't understand why I wasn't responding to this in a God-honoring way. Nobody knew—the other pastor at church, the members of the church, our families, our friends. Nobody knew. And it would remain that way for about five months.

By October, things were escalating as the separation did not change. I had brought up the idea of a pattern of sin to my pastor after church one Sunday. At this point I still was convinced that this was all on my wife, that my wife was unforgiving, and that this would all be resolved if my wife would repent of her lack of forgiveness and her sinful behavior in the car. If my wife could only have been more joyful overall, nothing would have happened. If my wife would have

overcome her anger with God in the midst of her grief, none of this would have happened. If my wife would have received the harsh response in the car quietly and gently, none of this would have happened. That's where I was.

That's how deep I was in seeing this not just as normal pastoral care but as an expression of biblical love and care. In a later conversation with the denominational regional leader, one of the questions he asked me to explain how the events that transpired were different than pastoral care.

Somehow, my wife was the one under the microscope with a need to forgive. This dissonance did not challenge me at the time. But, since I couldn't live with this situation unresolved, I approached my pastor after church one Sunday since he had just finished preaching a sermon about the unity of the church and how we were to walk with arms linked together. My wife could not stomach the difference between the preached word and the lived word that Sunday. So I went to talk to my pastor after the service. Towards the end of the conversation I mentioned to him that I was seeing a pattern of behavior in him, and his response was that I was being intellectually lazy, trying to grab things that may remotely resemble what I was going through. I was told that I did not really know anything about the situations that I mentioned in the pattern, so I knew after that conversation I wasn't to bring this pattern up anymore. I believe I recall correctly that I was told to shut up already about that particular brother in Christ due to my ignorance of all the circumstances surrounding his departure from our old church many years ago.

My wife is a survivor of sexual abuse that took place in her childhood. My wife had the joy of watching God restore her to such a degree that it is nothing short of miraculous.

At some point in October I knew I couldn't be in the middle of this anymore. I couldn't be judge and party, I couldn't be the mediator, I couldn't make this go away, I couldn't fix it. So I tried to get my pastor and my wife together to sort this out. My wife insisted that somebody else be present for this, and I rejected that on account of Matthew 18 saying that we weren't at the point of bringing somebody from the outside in. My wife's response to danger had been activated. She shook for over a day since I put forward the meeting with our pastor and his wife in our home. She did not feel safe. My response to her was that she needed not to fear because I would protect her. My pastor was very unhappy with that response because he said that my wife should have been told that such a fear was unfounded.

I was trying to communicate, "I will protect you." My pastor believed the message should have been, There is nothing from which you need protection.

Nobody was happy with me either way. He came to our home and shared an apology. He was visibly shaken and upset over it. My wife did not accept this apology. They left. The separation grew worse. The apology spoke of pride as being at the root of much in his ministry.

My wife's desire for reconciliation was labeled by him as the pursuit of a Jay Adams-compliant-apology. To most of you this label may mean nothing, but it is partly a mockery of my wife's belief in the sufficiency of Scripture in counseling and all of life. It is also partly a critique of her understanding of the role of biblical counseling in the life of a Christian. It is also partly the effort to label my wife's pursuit of reconciliation as bitterness and unforgiveness. It has been said that if my wife really wanted reconciliation, she would have accepted this apology no matter how imperfect or how short it may fall and ought to have restored the fellowship.

My wife knew better than me that this was not a simple offense or a matter of the kind that we are called to overlook in the Word. This was abuse, plain and simple, and that is a different matter. This is not in the same category as the "I didn't call you back quickly enough" or the "I

walked by without realizing you were there” apologies. There are public and private aspects of this that have to be dealt with properly. Chapter 6 of Ken Sande’s *The Peacemaker* is a good reference to what right confession entails. Sande lists the seven A’s of confession: (1) address everyone involved, (2) avoid if, but, and maybe, (3) admit specifically, (4) acknowledge the hurt, (5) accept the consequences, (6) alter your behavior, and (7) ask for forgiveness (and allow time). The apology at my house that day fell short of all of these guidelines for a right confession.

The other elder and his wife were brought in at this point, but I will not recount that event at this point.

Nobody in our small group knew what we were going through. But they could all see the signs of distress. Nobody in the worship team knew what I was going through. But they could see signs of things not being right. One couple cornered us one Sunday after church and invited us to lunch. I knew the inevitable moment had come where I would have to speak about this. They were greatly concerned about us, and in an exemplary manifestation of Christian care for us, they sat with us and listened to us. I didn’t want to be a betrayer of my pastor, so I didn’t want to speak. I wanted to be *the gracious one*. I still spoke to them in coded, unclear terms, not really standing by my wife’s side, but being an advocate for our pastor. But at least somebody knew. They were the only ones.

It would be another three months before another sermon would result in great affliction for my wife, the last sermon we heard together in 2018 from our pastor at our church. That morning one of the members of the music team came to her since she was visibly upset and asked her if she was OK, and Angela responded sincerely that she wasn’t. I took my wife to our pastor’s office to try to resolve this again.

The conversation started out fairly promising. We were acknowledging that there was separation that needed to be dealt with, that there was sin involved that needed to be addressed, that my wife was following the Word regarding iron sharpening iron, i.e., bringing these matters up and confronting our pastor to rise up to another degree of glory into the image of Christ. But the conversation came off the wheels, and I, again, sided with our pastor when my wife challenged the explanation given for the separation. My wife explained she felt discarded and set aside. Our pastor said that the intention was not that but that he did not know how to address this. My wife expressed that it didn’t really matter why the separation had come to be but that it was happening and all under the talk and preaching of unity. The situation escalated to another outburst from our pastor where he told my wife that her words were not from God, couldn’t be trusted, couldn’t teach or speak to him about contrition, and that he wouldn’t be friends anymore with her.

My wife walked away from that with clarity as to where things stood. I walked away from there again blaming my wife for the conversation not having the right resolution, for being unreasonable. I went to visit a church member with our pastor. He prayed for me in the parking lot. The next steps were introduced in that conversation. We would pray about bringing in a couple from our old church.

As you can see, the isolation was real.

OUR STORY: THE RESIGNATION

I resigned to the pastorate in January. I knew I had to do it.

But the reasoning behind the decision changed as time progressed. This has been used as a evidence of how untrustworthy I am said to be (I had one of the elders confront me in a Matthew 18 setting about being unable to trust me for saying one thing and doing another).

The conversation in December with our former pastor left my wife in such a hopeless state that there was no life left in her. If she were not a God-fearing woman, she would have seriously considered suicide. Yet because of her commitment to Christ and to me, she did not walk away on life or on me.

She was told that she was not a Christian, and her friends of almost twenty years, who in many ways had been her family, turned their back on her. Not even I as her husband stood by her. Nothing changed after meeting with the other pastor and his wife in October. She was alone.

I had to resign because I could not possibly be judge and party of this situation as a member of this eldership.

I had to resign because while sharing this story with a dear friend, he helped me see how I was lacking sobermindedness in the situation, and the Word does require sobriety in sobermindedness to be a pastor.

I saw this as I had allowed these fears of mine to cloud my judgment. I could not possibly see how I could make a right judgment about all of this with a proper perspective. I confessed to this disqualifying lack of sobermindedness and resigned. This confession has been used subsequently to discount what I have to say about this whole matter. In the last face-to-face interaction I had with my former pastor back in July, the point was clearly made that I don't see things rightly and that by stepping aside from the denominational and the local church authority, there is no oversight over my use of Scripture and over me. The point was clearly made that I do not see things as they are. And that I will not be the person to help him see things as they are.

I had to resign because, though I couldn't quite put it into words or quote exact phrases, my marriage was on the line. Division has plagued this whole series of events. Even in that last meeting in July, the out was given—if my wife and I had a sharp disagreement about whether this is or not abuse, then that would be a different thing I was told.

I had been so concerned about losing my wife, whether through suicide or by her divorcing me, that in the conversations I had with my former pastor I was comforted by him that if she were to leave me, nobody would think less of me, that I was going to be all right. Clearly, division was there, a supposedly self-evident 'Ang is clearly wrong here' attitude. That divided our marriage greatly. Sure, he may not have ever said, "Go and divorce her," but the seeds of the division that could lead to divorce were there. And the longer that I was there, the more I knew that division would grow and fester.

I had been challenged to find alternative education options for my children who are currently taught by my wife as I was told that allowing my wife to continue to teach them would propagate her sin to them. It was even predicted by him that one of my children would become judgmental and the other a party girl. My wife was considered an infection point to the local church in an elders meeting when it had become known to my former pastor that my wife had been part of a Psalms Bible study group in the evenings. I was advised to treat my wife as an unbeliever—daily challenge my wife to forgiveness towards my former pastor. The way that was discussed was very cold yet was described as biblical love—to win her, to bring about her repentance, and reconciliation. I was advised to take her to counseling and in front of the counselor let her discuss things and say that I didn't agree with them. I did not realize how

caring and building up my wife were not really part of the advice, even though care and love for her were supposedly the driving force behind the advice.

A dear brother and sister from our old church came and sat with us for two full, cold days in January in our dining room to help us think through how to move forward together.

You see, I had told my friends about this situation back in November, even when I thought it was all my wife's fault. I came into my friend's house to stay for one night while my wife was out of town, and I went in talking myself into making it through the day without saying anything about any of this. I really did believe that discussing these matters would be gossip and slander. For many years, disloyalty had clearly been shown to be a way to be outside of the inner ring, so to speak, at the church. Disloyalty was looked down upon by my former pastor and a great source of visible hurt to him. I did not want to be disloyal. I did not want to go on the list of those who betrayed him. Especially when my friend had been seen as disloyal in the past.

I was afraid of telling the truth to my brothers. I was afraid of talking and admitting that I was so deep in this and that I needed help. I was so lonely.

A few weeks prior to seeing my friends, I had shared with my small group leader that I was confronted by my pastor about the fear of man. It was a very coded way of saying that I needed help! What actually happened was that following the failed apology meeting at my home in October, the November elders' meeting was mostly a session where I was belittled and put in my place. I was reminded of the most significant times where my fear of man was visible, regardless of whether those were stories of redemption, of God's faithfulness to deliver me from it, or if I had repented of them. I was belittled and put in my place. I didn't know how to put things into words, but once again I put it all under the category of hard things my pastor says because he loves me. So, I took it in stride, sought to repent of what I had not previously repented of, but I was left very shaken. I shared with my friend so he could pray for me in this struggle against the fear of man. I did not say this was during an elders' meeting. I did not say that I was belittled. I spun the event in its best possible light. But even so, when this concerned leader had made a comment to the pastor that he was thankful that I could take correction like that, my pastor confronted me with sharing with others business from the elders meeting. It became very clear to me that silence was necessary, that being a pastor meant to be isolated from those we were called to care for, to live a life where they have no access to any of this. I was a mess. I continued to see that my lot as a pastor was going to have to be isolation from meaningful community.

With all of this inside of me, I did not want to speak to my friends about the situation because I did not want to become the gossip, the Judas. But I also didn't want to speak to them because one of them had gone through a similar situation with our pastor two years prior when he was also under my care. You see, when people have left, it's always something in them or something they did or the sin in them. It is never the leadership—so and so is weak, so and so is flaky, so and so has a problem with authority, so and so is unrepentant, so and so is unsubmissive, so and so has a problem with the institutional church, and so on. I didn't want to talk about this in his presence.

I couldn't. But I did. It was one of those moments of surrender to the Spirit.

We talked about it. It was awful. It was hard. It was heart-breaking to see that I was going through what he had gone through while I watched, while he was under my pastoral care. Yet, he was generous enough to pause his life for two days to leave it all behind and come help my wife and I survive. They would not have come to the rescue had I not told them what happened. It is very difficult to get yourself out of isolation when the cloud of secrecy

surrounds you in every way. Secrecy is understood as godliness, as wisdom, as obedience and love for the Lord and His church. As the noble thing to do.

The point of that detour is to explain that I had to resign because while we were talking for those two days, one of the commitments I had made in order to restore life to my wife and to my marriage was that I would resign from eldership at the church.

I was still against my wife, though. I was still standing by the plurality of elders at the church and believing that this was not abuse and that if my wife were to just forgive and set aside her bitterness all would be well.

I turned in my resignation at the January elders' meeting. The elders decided to not accept it at that time but to allow me to not attend the church.

In God's good providence, He had made a connection for me to know about a local church planter who was working with the Latino community, and after a short trip to Minneapolis generously provided to us by the Lord to gather at the Bethlehem College conference for pastors (talk about having an identity crisis in front of all sorts of brothers and sisters in the faith!), we started to attend that church.

It was critical to me, even then, to not be disconnected from the Body of the Church. I have wanted from the beginning to make clear that my commitment to Christ's church and my submission to my Lord are unchanged. But despite these ecclesiastical distortions I have lived through, I am not done with the church. The gates of hell will not prevail against her. I refuse to disconnect from the church and from the care of Christ's undershepherds.

Things can go further astray when you become further isolated and disconnected from Christ. God also connected me with a dear brother who is conducting an expository study of the gospel of Mark on Wednesday nights in Spanish, and that has been a source of refreshment to my soul as well. We are not isolated. We are not people who are running away from accountability. We are not running from the consequences of what we have done. We are experiencing, though, isolation from those we befriended and came to love from the church we came here to serve. Know this—we love the Bride of Christ and we want her wholeness, holiness, and beauty to be clearly displayed to our beloved watching world.

LISTENING TO MY WIFE

I started listening to my wife, actually listening to her. At the risk of being repetitive, I had been given direction to go to counseling and confront my wife in front of the counselor: "I don't agree with this, I don't agree with that, etc." How could this *not* have caused further division and even divorce and death?

As I started listening to her I became increasingly aware of areas in my life where I had wrong beliefs driving wrong responses to abuse. I couldn't even want to think of this as wrong or as abuse. It became more clear to me that I had resigned because I could not affirm the leadership at the church and of which I was a part. It became more clear to me that I could not affirm an unrepentant man as qualified for the office of pastor and serve under and alongside him. Now, to be fair in reporting, there are at least two reports of events I am aware of that there has been some repentance in the life of my friend. Yet, this broken relationship between us stands as testimony that we are not there yet.

The resignation dragged on through the week prior to Easter where we had a Matthew 18 meeting with our pastor, the other elder of the church, and the regional leader of the

denomination. This meeting became a confirmation bias event: My wife and I walked away with our understanding confirmed that our pastor was not repentant and that there seemed to be little hope of reconciliation. They walked away with their understanding confirmed of the pastor's qualifications and that he was in the receiving end of unforgiveness, bitterness, and a weaponization of his apologies against him.

Our former pastor had become the victim.

No restoration.

The resignation was accepted after that last Matthew 18 meeting. The resignation agreement that is part of the church polity needed to be written and signed. The proposed agreement from the elders essentially said this is because of a bad marriage and recommended my life in the home and marriage be thoroughly examined by any eldership in the future willing to bring me in to serve alongside them. I could not sign that document, so I was told I could write it. I wrote it as I would want it known publicly and with a clean conscience, and that final version includes my reason for resigning as being unable to affirm the qualifications of the senior pastor of the church. Since this document had to be signed by the three of us, it also includes a strong statement of disagreement from the senior pastor and the remaining member of the plurality.

OUR STORY: MATTHEW 18

It turns out that Matthew 18 can be turned into a really hard text. It has both been discouraging and a source of escalations of conflict. It also has been *the* excuse used to not resolve this.

Plainly, Jesus tells you that when your brother sins against you, you ought to go to him on your own and confront him. If he doesn't listen, take a friend or two along with you to establish the right witnesses for this if repentance is not forthcoming. If he still doesn't listen, you are to take it to the church. And at that point, it is the local church's authority to deal with the matter if repentance is not reached. Let's let the text speak for itself:

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence 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, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 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." (Matthew 18:15-20)

Simple enough, right?

I filed charges against our pastor with our denomination regarding this pattern of sin that was manifested with my wife and I. We were not the only ones. This has happened to at least two witnesses that were required to file the charges. We know of others, but this was never a campaign or a crusade to go find all possible sources or to storm the gates and take his pastorate. Yet, God has been very kind to us to help us find restoration with beloved brothers and sisters we have hurt in this way in the past. They have been gracious to forgive and restore fellowship with us.

Back to Matthew 18.

Simple enough, right? If the pastor sinned against my wife in that car, was he confronted for it by my wife between himself and my wife? It's not that straightforward. I was also involved and so was his wife. From the beginning this was not a one-on-one thing. But yes, we do believe Matthew 18 was followed. The denomination disagrees.

The event in the car and the subsequent separation of fellowship especially *in light of public preaching about unity also had immediate public implications*—the fellowship between the pastor and another pastor's wife was severed, and sermons were preached about unity, having hard conversations, and the book of Acts. There is a dissonance at best, hypocrisy at worst.

This was not clear to me at first: this was from the beginning catalogued as a *conflict*. It resulted in conflict, that is true, but this is not mainly about conflict. **This is about abuse.** Abuse has taken place. Abuse has taken place in the past. And a key to diagnosing abuse is **patterns**. If the patterns are dismissed as intellectually lazy, there is no way to establish this. It can always be minimized—you misunderstood, my tone wasn't right, I love you so much, I was betrayed, so and so rejects all authority.

If you only look at isolated events, abuse cannot be determined.

And if you have a soft conscience you will dwell on your contributions to this only and will stay there trying to live in repentance. The result is that the abuse goes unchallenged and grows disjointed so that it becomes just a question of tone or words or not leading well instead of abuse.

The charges were filed and the questions that concerned our pastor, his orthodoxy and qualifications were ruled as irrelevant due to a failure to follow Matthew 18 on my part (and I assume my wife's part, though nobody spoke with her directly about this during the judicial process). We were told to follow Matthew 18 and pursue mediation if needed. The judicial arm of the denominational region had spoken. I had an appeal available to me in the polity, but I chose not to use it. I still stand by my decision to not avail myself of said appeal.

I have been told that there was no Matthew 18 conversation between my pastor and I. There seemed to be an implication in the discussions about this that for a confrontation to count it had to somehow be announced as a Matthew 18 confrontation. This was never explicitly said, but the application of Matthew 18 was very rigid.

I had multiple meetings where however cowardly as I may have been, I tried to make progress in this. I understand that I am an indirect communicator, and that I also was deeply conflicted and sinful about confronting my pastor. Yet, those are not counted as Matthew 18, step 1, meetings. I recall speaking to him about never seeming repentant during his sermons, about speaking of planting churches (plural) and founding orphanages at a members meeting, and about the pattern of sin. I also shared with him the struggle to not seeing myself or my wife as the target of his sermons. And that was a very emotional meeting where I was admitting and owning sin. I remember being visibly shaken when I saw in a manuscript for an upcoming sermon his taking up the subject of nitpicking and parsing words. I felt my wife and/or I were targeted on that, and he was offended that I brought up the matter. I had written about it but only took to the meeting one definition I had written, but it was enough to make it a very uncomfortable meeting. Could I have spoken more clearly? Yes. Could I have been more deliberate? Yes.

While reading more about spiritual abuse, I read the following recently—[bracketed comments are mine] and the words are from Leslie Vernick in *Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused*:

Because we can all relate to blowing it in our own relationships, we hate to judge someone else as abusive. *[This describes perfectly the wrestling of my soul. I know I have blown it! So, I went into this place in my soul where I told myself ‘how dare I speak about this?']* But there are some critical differences between an ordinary sinner and an abusive person's tactics.

First, when a spiritually healthy yet still sinful person crosses the line, has done something deceptive, mean spirited, or hurtful to someone he or she loves, the Holy Spirit convicts your conscious that you've sinned. We don't feel entitled, justified, or blame the other person for what we did.

Second, when a healthy person crosses the line and hurts someone they love, even if they don't recognize that behavior as abusive, when their loved one tells them OUCH, that hurt, we don't ignore it, or minimize it or mock their pain. Instead we respond with genuine sorrow and repentance and make every effort to not repeat that behavior in the future.

Third, close people in our life feel safe to give us feedback about our attitudes and actions without fearing more abuse. *[While the first two points resonate, this third point helped me understand the ‘fear’ behind Matthew 18 step 1 in me—I knew without the shadow of a doubt that I was going to get it when I brought things up to him. I had seen it happen before to others, and I didn't want it to happen to me. That is sinful—don't miss that. I sinned in letting that fear of being belittled stop me from confronting more explicitly, but however cowardly it may have been, I did.]*

But that's not the pattern with someone in a relationship with an abuser.

First, there is a lack of personal responsibility for wrongdoing. Instead there is repeated defensiveness, minimizing, excuse-making, and blame shifting. “It's your fault I acted that way. If only you wouldn't make me so mad, or do what I want, this wouldn't have happened.”

Second, the victim is not free to honestly talk about his or her feelings or the impact of the abuse without incurring more abuse. As a result, victims tend to become more and more isolated because of having to lie and pretend just to keep the abuse secret or the abuser calm.

Third, even when there is disclosure of abuse, the relationship history shows no long-term change. There may be repeated promises to change but there is no significant change in attitude or action.

That all applies to this situation. As a matter of fact, he denies the charges, says they were actually manifestations of the same pattern of sin I presented to him—impatient and sinful. He affirms that the charges were based on a lie, on unsubstantiated gossip.

My wife interacted with the pastor's wife directly the next day after the event in the car in May in our house. That is also not recognized as a Matthew 18, step 1, meeting. The meeting my wife had with him and the other elder and his wife in my presence and the accused elder and his wife also does not seem to count as Matthew 18, step 2. The meeting that we had with our former pastor in December also does not seem to count as step 2.

There is a rigidity here about Matthew 18 that is confounding to me. I am told to be overly gracious in accepting an apology as a full confession, that my wife must accept as a full confession that imperfect apology that was offered and that that increased my former pastor's heart rate as documented by his iWatch. That is, we are told not to go by the letter of the law but by the spirit of the law. The man meant to apologize, just accept the apology and move on. That is essentially what is communicated to us. What is the big deal? Get over it. Don't you see he has reached out to others and they have been eager to reconcile with him? What's the matter with *you*? We are said to have the dreaded and Scripturally-misquoted root of bitterness.

There is a call to us to not take repentance literally, but it comes with a rigid interpretation of Matthew 18—while I ask you to just take the apology in the best possible light, we will affirm you did not follow Matthew 18 in order to deem this whole event as irrelevant. And from that legal interpretation, the key question arises of why did we talk to others about this? Why did we file charges in a so-called impatient fashion?

Regardless, I did agree to the April Matthew 18 meeting as an effort to restart things. I was willing to make it a Matthew 18, step 1, meeting, erring in grace to give this an opportunity to advance. My wife wasn't in the same place as me, since she sees this at a stage where the church ought to be involved (and filing charges in March was in the eyes of our denomination taking it to the church per the polity). My wife said that this was at a stage 3 of Matthew 18, and I am accused of deception for saying that we both were having a stage 1 meeting. We did meet, and the meeting became about how my wife was placing unbiblical requirements for repentance upon our former pastor (i.e., seeking to persuade him to step down from office to focus on this situation without the hinderance of church leadership). "An ultimatum has been issued" is a direct quote from that meeting. My wife sought to persuade, not to mandate anything. We do not have ecclesiastical authority over this man's calling to the ministry.

There was no restoration in that meeting. We agreed to pursue a third party to help us work things out as it was agreed that there is a pattern. There was disagreement on what the pattern is and to what extent it is sinful. That third party turned us down for time and availability reasons, but he recommended that we would seek involvement with a Christian conflict resolution ministry. I reached out to them, but that did not come to pass. One of the objections of my former pastor to pursuing that is that Angela and I were outside of the denominational boundaries of authority. It was said that we were defining words and interpreting Scripture in a different way to him—the example was that we are using the same words but meaning different things much like the Jehovah's Witnesses and LDS people would, so it was clear that he was talking about deviations from orthodoxy on my and my wife's part. The objection also included the charge that my wife and I were without accountability. He never affirmed a commitment to pursuing that path nor did he tell the person from that ministry that he would like to start the process. In fairness, there have been verbal statements that he would be willing to engage in the process, but they haven't been followed up with action.

Another element of the use of Matthew 18 in here is that it is used as a weapon of silence. Once the charges were found to be irrelevant, the denominational polity guidelines consider discussions about this subject to be considered slander and gossip. Our regional leader affirmed during that meeting that to not share this would certainly be wise.

This application of Matthew 18 also does not account properly for situations like the one we find ourselves in. You cannot possibly get perspective on this without time and without outside counsel. To deem such pursuit of counsel gossip and slander is on its own counterproductive. It shuts the door to light. To ask a victim of abuse to confront her abuser alone is not something that is good shepherding. Start at page 156 of *The Peacemaker* for more insight

about the Matthew 18 process as it relates to somebody in a position of authority. The biblical text does not preclude a person from asking others for advice and trying to sort out all the self-doubt that abuse and manipulation bring.

OUR STORY: VENGEANCE, REVENGE, AND BITTERNESS

For many years I have believed what is a very typical evangelical belief in our day—that there is a root of bitterness, based on Hebrews 12:15, that when left to fester will result in great harm to the bitter person and to the Church.

Then, when somebody finds herself in the place where my wife was—angry and frustrated with the dissonance between the public ministry of the Word and the private response to sin—she is said to be unforgiving and bitter. And that bitterness will be the root of a number of sins such as vengeance and revenge, a desire for vindication.

This would describe my wife as a militant opponent as a result of this bitterness that has not been dealt with. In a moment of frustration, my former pastor was vocal to me about his disappointment that he had sent me into the darkness to fight for my wife, to get her out, not to join her. Those were not his exact words, but that was the idea. This militant opposition would of course all cease, no matter how few of the seven A's of repentance are exhibited in the non-Jay Adams-compliant apology extended to her, *if* she weren't bitter and would forgive.

At some point in this saga, I was instructed to ask my wife every day, "Have you forgiven our pastor?" Then preach the gospel and pray for her. That is, treat her as an unbeliever.

The moment my wife would forgive would be the moment the house of cards of this bitterness would come crashing down and we could all be restored.

The thing is that by equating forgiveness with a removal of all consequences, what is accomplished is not really the good care of my wife's soul but her silence.

Shut up or you will be known as bitter.

And I think that attributing this to my wife's bitterness as poisonous is perhaps the most persuasive argument people find. People have heard our story, they've been upset by it. Then they disappear. We are slanderers, right, what else do we expect? People can see right through our bitterness!

It turns out that the root of bitterness in Hebrews 12:15 has nothing to do with bitterness as portrayed in this section so far and popularized by this teaching, but it is related to a person who in his pride and arrogance refuses to rest on the good news of the new covenant, a person who makes himself god and "one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart'" (Deuteronomy 29:19). If you think this is a misinterpretation of Scripture I would commend to you easily accessible resources such as G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson's well-known and highly-recommended commentary from my former pastor *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* or the Reformation Study Bible. Even the ESV Study Bible points this out in its note on Hebrews 12:15 though it also continues the incorrect teaching by going after what we think of bitterness rather than the biblical reference to Deuteronomy.

Am I saying that we haven't dealt with bitterness? Absolutely not. Of course we have. When something bitter happens to you as it does in the Bible (Gen 26:34-35, Job 9:18, Prov 17:25,

Jer 2:19, Jer 4:18, Lam 1:4, Lam 3:19, Zeph 1:14), it truly is bitter. This whole situation is full of bitter pills to swallow. Are we stuck in bitterness? No. Do we find ourselves at times with a bitter taste in the mouth? Yes. We drive past the church building on our way to church on Sunday morning, of course that is bitter. We look at pictures in our walls and albums of happy moments with people we love and are distant from us now, of course that is bitter. We see the family from a distance and we mourn not rejoicing and mourning with them as seasons come and go, of course that is bitter. It doesn't mean we are dwelling in that bitterness and hardening our hearts.

The key question here is—are our hearts hardened against any possibility of repentance in the part of our pastor (and those who uphold him)?

My answer for you is that we have forgiven him. We forgive him every time something comes back to haunt us. We long for the day where fellowship is restored and joy and gladness through repentance change the taste of this story.

So, no, we are not in some crusade driven by bitterness, a thirst for vengeance that will rest at nothing but having the pastor's job handed over. We don't want to *destroy* the local church—as a matter of fact, I nearly lost my wife's life and my marriage trying to not destroy the local church. We are not weaponizing this tragedy to get our way. My wife is not trying to ascribe to herself a Carte-Blanche victim status as she was said to be doing by our former pastor.

And there is bitterness in these words, yes, of course. Because this is a bitter thing.

Let the gospel sweetness transform it!

OUR STORY: SLANDER AND GOSSIP REDEFINED

I was presented with a document defining slander that I was to use for my wife's instruction on the subject. The core of this definition is that slander is taking something in its worst possible light, and it uses Paul's assessment of the distortion of the gospel in Romans 3:8 as the exegetical basis for that definition. This document was later preached at the church.

Years ago I read Matthew Mitchel's *Resisting Gossip* book. I found it to be quite helpful. It showed that "the sin of gossip is bearing bad news behind someone's back out of a bad heart." The bad heart part stayed with me over the years, the bad intent—that the intent of gossip is twofold: one is to do harm to the other party, and the other intent is the self-soothing pleasure that comes to a hard and hardening heart that results from that.

Betraying a confidence is at the core of this. What is a confidence? There are things I've been told over the years that I cannot and will not repeat because they were things said in confidence. My brain has a number of trade secrets stored in it because of my work. I have stories from people's lives in my brain that I have learned over the years of ministry. Those are confidences. Not cover-ups.

There is a difference between betraying a confidence and covering up abuse. There is a difference between betraying a confidence and keeping things from the legitimate owner of the information. That's why separating this whole matter from the local church has been so key—that's what allows the things that have transpired to be seen as confidences to be kept quiet rather than the purview of the local church in having authority over her elders that she called to serve and lead her.

There is a difference between backstabbing and seeking to bring the light in. There is a difference between grace and sinning against others by not putting the facts before them.

Chapter 4 of *Resisting Gossip* is all about believing the best. This is not intended to force you to rush to judgment. You should be able to see that rushing to judgment led me to make key mistakes here—calling this conflict instead of abuse, not listening to my wife, keeping our predicament from church members who could have helped us and rebuked us.

Slander is the sharing of falsehood, the sharing of lies, with an intent to harm. So, you could say it's a kind of gossip, the kind of gossip that relates to false accusations. Page 65 of *Resisting Gossip* discusses how *katalaleo* (James 4:11) is more than “just maliciously lying about someone.” It means “to speak against someone, to talk them down, to speak ill of them, to disdain someone or to run somebody down verbally.” That actually is what we have gone through as part of this situation. The verbal run down has been a key part of this. Tim Keller and David Powlison are quoted as saying that “[*Katalaleo*] is not necessarily a false report, just an ‘against-report.’ The intent is to belittle another. To pour out contempt. To mock. To hurt. To harm. To destroy. To rejoice in purported evil.” Our intent is to restore, to build up, to heal.

Mitchell describes how while “judging is necessary but dangerous” in the words of Ken Sande, we must stay away from (1) rushing to judgment, (2) prideful judgment, and (3) unloving judgment. The intent of this is not to tempt you to take a side and rush to judgment, to even judge this thing if it's not your place to do so (an outside observer with no stake in this), to think of yourself as more holy than those involved, or to just react unlovingly. The idea here is that a right judgment is necessary. The right judgment is required for all of us to move forward with freedom. And while we are not unbiased, we can do our best to present the facts, not our opinions of somebody's intent or motives. Facts can be denied, but they cannot be disproved.

We have been warned against gossip and slander. But are we gossiping and slandering?

The denominational polity says that we are because we are bringing to light a matter that was ruled as irrelevant by its judicial committee. I did not avail myself of the right to an appeal. So, the denominational guide indicates that to speak of this constitutes gossip and slander.

I was in a seminary class this past summer, and we were addressing ecclesiology. This is not a tickling of my ears moment. In addressing the implications of the new covenant to the church, I became aware of how we got to defining silence as wisdom and the speaking of truth as slander. **We bypassed the local congregation's authority.** The church was fired as Jonathan Leeman aptly describes. Instead of this being something that the church, who calls her pastors and is led by them (both), receives and seeks the Lord about prior to making a determination, it became a matter outsourced to the judicial arm of the denomination. Thus, the church's role to hear the matter per Matthew 18 was completely discarded, and now, to even bring it up to them is considered slander and gossip. There is actually no mechanism in the local church to which this can be brought up.

That's what makes the big difference here—if the church has no business knowing the sin that involved her leaders, then this definition of gossip and slander comes into existence. It becomes the sharing of confidences that ought to be honored, the exposing of things that ought to be covered.

But if it is the legitimate role of the church to address this redemptively, *which it is*, and if it is the right authority on earth to deal with this, *which it is*, then this is not gossip and slander but a silencing of what ought to be known and addressed.

Also, the intent is repentance, not harm for our beloved former pastor. We cannot see him whither away in this. We want God's fruitfulness on him, his family, his calling in life. I want for him what Doug Wilson once prayed, "I pray that it would be true blessing. I pray that whatever You do for them would be a blessing all the way down, down to the soles of their feet [...] I would ask that You pour out on them an abundance of grace — on their churches, on their marriages, on their businesses, on their ministries. I pray that their sleep would be sweet, their marriages graced, their tables rich, their bank accounts full, and their grand-kids cute. I know, Father, how much You have given to me, and I pray that You would give them at least twice as much."

This is not gossip. This is not slander. This is about restoring the prophetic voice—in him, in me, in the local church. We must take all sin seriously, mine first, deal with it completely, and walk in the light without shame and in complete confidence of the power of the gospel message we proclaim. Why would we hide in the shadows of shame?

OUR STORY: DISCERNMENT BLOGGERS AND EVIL

I have wronged my wife in sin for many months now because I became paralyzed by this. I gave her no direction on how to move forward. I gave her no vision. You see, there are these characters known as the *discernment bloggers*. And in the circles where I have lived, they are pretty close to being considered the bottom layer of humanity. A friend simply put it once, "They are evil. I don't read them." So, as soon as I started to get my bearings on this situation, I knew that some sort of disclosure like this would have to happen. And I started freaking out.

I did not provide my wife any direction about how to move forward because the idea of being labeled a discernment blogger really stopped me in my tracks. Over the course of many years, discernment bloggers have been flat out dismissed and criticized. My wife was essentially warned in the car about her future—she was from the moment when she had received this special treatment, from this point in time when she had this "hard conversation," from this time when she received this *hard truth*, she was now in a position to become the next Rachael Denhollander. That was not meant as a compliment. I must also note that this awful thing did expose my wife's heart that she was a child idolater at that time, and God used the shouting match to expose that sin in her.

He knew it would come to this, and the effort to stop it was there. In one elders meeting I was told that one day this may make a nice article for The Gospel Coalition. There again was this effort to say, I know you are going to do this, don't.

There is plenty of things that discernment bloggers don't get right—at times it reads like you are on Pride Rock after Scar and the hyenas have ruled the land into desolation. But until this happened to us, I did not realize that it is exactly how this feels. If you isolate somebody for long enough, if you don't repent for your part of the sin, and you are unwilling to listen, where else can they go? What else can they do?

I have been called a sucker by a discernment blogger in the past, and if the author of such a piece were reading this, he would probably find himself saying, "I told you this would happen to you." And he did. And it did.

Truth is truth. At times the packaging is damaged pretty badly, but it's the worst when we realize that the package looks bad because we had it in our back pocket in a hot summer day, while we were sitting down in a hot bench. We made the packaging get that bad. And our pants, too.

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:24-26)

Let's say for argument's sake that I am evil and I am entangled by the devil into destroying my friend and his church. Paul speaks in 2 Timothy 2:24-26 how one of Christ's undershepherds ought to love me—with kindness, patience, gentleness, a desire to see repentance and freedom from bondage.

OUR STORY: THE HURT WE'VE CAUSED

One of the main reasons to bring this to light is that I am not without fault here. I have been part of this. I know the hurt a family experienced under the pastoral care at my local church, and God has been faithful to restore that fellowship through mutual repentance and fellowship. Yet, they are still out of fellowship with our former pastor. I know the hurt others have experienced and have had similar experiences of restoration with them by being open to the leading of the Spirit. Do not take that to mean, "This bitter man has gone out of the way to find people who can line up in his camp." Quite the contrary, you should know how much I've avoided talking about this to others.

There was one instance of abuse that I brought up to my former pastor the last time we spoke in person. His response was to remind me that I had written to him a note that resulted in the action. I left the meeting blaming myself for the abuse my friends received until a few days later I realized my note did not say, "Go, yell at him—tell him he is an unbeliever." My note said they were outside.

We lived in a culture where we let the works of the flesh be a part of our ministry. People's sins became lists that defined them, they were known by their weaknesses. At times they were cause for laughter. At times they were cause for anger. I recall sitting at a BBQ place discussing a difficult situation where the prescription for the solution to it is too graphic to be shared now as it referred to bedroom activity but was proclaimed loudly in a public place. I did not know what to do with that, so I didn't do anything. I asked him the last time we met what I am to do with those memories. There was no response.

I was called to pastor my friend. I was called to pastor my friends. I was called to keep watch for everyone, and I let my inaction become my action. I didn't do anything to stop this. For that, I repent.

I carry burdens. I carry things I know. I carry things I've heard. There are things there that if the person were to know they were spoken by their pastor and pastors, they would be greatly hurt.

You see, there is far more on the line with my silence than the silencing of my wife.

There is a house of cards in there. You can dress it up with all kinds of works of repentance. You can meet with counselors, say you are under accountability, that you have read all the books on anger, that this only happens to those who really get close to you, that this won't happen again, but things are still out there in the darkness.

He has tried, I have been told, to reach out to people he has hurt in the past. I have known of some stories of reconciliation that have taken place though I don't know the details, and quite frankly it is not my place to now the details.

I am thankful for them that they don't have burdens like this to carry.

But the story of reconciliation is incomplete.

OUR STORY: THE HURT WE ARE EXPERIENCING

The kindness of God to us in this is that we are experiencing that which others have experienced before. There is an awful feeling we did not know—the silence between emails when you know there are side emails discussing the situation in full without you being included. There is the silence that comes from not hearing back from your friends and then getting a very controlled message back, the silence that comes from an email inbox that only produces junk mail now, the silence of limiting interactions to the required pleasantries that are both awful and awkward, the silence of being taught that this is our own doing—that our slander is what has gotten us here, that the separation is the necessary consequence of living lives given over to slander.

We have done this to others. We have let them slip away into the darkness. Some have been brave to tell us why they left. Others haven't. They were wronged, and we never repented of it.

Some accused the pastor of false teaching. I didn't give them a fair hearing. Some could not tell us what happened. I didn't give them space but pressed them to affirm the pastor's love for them. Some would redirect by giving other excuses. I let them get away with it, so to speak.

I tried to persuade the hurting that they weren't hurting. I tried to encourage the hurting that our pastor loved them and that there was no better place for them.

This is not how Christ shepherds the church, and I'm thankful that he has taught me this. And for that I repent.

OUR STORY: OUR HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

I am a post millennial. I am a hopeful person. I believe that God will be abundantly glorified in this and that He will bring about restoration. I believe that lies will subside and that truth will come out. I believe that relationships will be restored, and that the witness of his church will be beautified and magnified. I believe this is part of things getting better. I believe this is part of the Lord filling up the whole earth with his glory. I believe that God has been in the business of restoring our broken humanity. I believe that God is in the business of crushing any 21st century Babel Tower building operations. I believe that God is in the business of crushing our pride and our fears. I believe God wants our hearts. I believe there are many who are yet to know Him who are called by His name in this metropolitan area and beyond who will come to know the gospel because of this.

That's why this is a call to repentance. This is not the song of revenge. We ought to report this stuff, what is public publicly, even if we think it's going to bring disgrace to our churches. People who are not yet believers must see that we take sin seriously, we deal with it completely, and that we watch God's restoration in awe.

The greatest loss for me in this has been the hiding of my awe in God. I want that back. He truly is awe-some.

I was looking at my Bible the other morning as I opened it up to read it. It had a sticky note from one of my former pastor's sermons in the front page. It's been there for many months

now. It came from a sermon where he defined success as “God’s presence with God’s people for God’s praise.”

That’s what I want. That is precisely what success looks like in this. And there is nothing more destructive to experiencing God’s presence in our midst than this kind of isolation and break of fellowship.

In the April Matthew 18 meeting, we discussed how at the core of this there is a sinful taking of the place of God. That is a critical sin for an undershepherd of Jesus Christ. I repent of that. I have to repent of that when I see it in new areas. I call my friend to such repentance. I call the local church to rightly investigate this in a context that is free of bias. We are all too biased and have tried to handle it on our own. We love him. I would have done anything to keep this under covers. I just couldn’t stomach the supposed blemish on my beloved church’s supposed image.

I have been found guilty of much due to fear of man. My words are even dismissed on account of the fear of man. But I realized that I am the fall man for the fear of man. The way the eldership conducted business was heavily tied to the fear of man. The way the denominational polity is written is tied heavily to the fear of man. Our initial reaction to events like this is profoundly driven by the fear of man. What will people say/think/do? It is the fear of man that entangles everything. Let’s fear God and not man!

Abuse is a gospel issue. If you have questions about that, I point you to the SBC’s *Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused* curriculum and would ask you to prayerfully work through it. The church must become a place of refuge and justice under our watch. That’s who God is. We are here if you would like to ask us anything anytime. And no hard feelings if you don’t.

ADDRESSING MYTHS

We have dealt one way or another with a number of myths; some of them are from the conversations we have, the correspondence we have received, the ecclesiastical procedures we have gone through. Others are from within. The spiritual war is fought with the flesh, the world, and the devil.

You must always follow Matthew 18 in private first. No, it is not wrong to ask others for advice to help you see past your own blind spots—yes, keep yourself from gossip by all means. No, it is not wrong to not go to your abuser alone if you have been abused. Too many negatives, so try again—no, do not go to your abuser alone if you have been abused. No, it is not wrong to go with somebody else if you are confronting someone with a history of manipulation. The idea of Matthew 18 is to keep the circle close and tight because we are hoping for repentance. That doesn’t mean you need to put yourself in a dangerous situation (if this were physical or sexual abuse nobody would have to make this point explicitly).

You cannot be trusted because you shift your position. One of the key things that turned one of my fellow elders to mistrust towards me and my word is what he described to me as not “knowing what to believe about [me]” and a disregard of counsel. Sometimes I’ve erred in trying to be gracious as one day that I sent a text message saying that I would not be sure if my former pastor would say I challenged him in a Matthew 18 setting. That has been used against me. The point here is that I have shifted my position. I have shifted my position many times. I have shifted my position begrudgingly. I have shifted my position in ways that made me very uncomfortable. I have done things that I didn’t think I would ever do (like file charges for example, hoping that the denominational process would be fair and just). I have changed my

mind because I have listened to my wife, I have sought the Lord in His Word, I have sought counsel, I have read literature from multiple sources and points of view. I have listened to things, and I have seen things differently. That doesn't mean that you cannot trust me. Unlike God, I'm finite, and I am not omniscient. I do not know the future, and I do not fully know the past. I do not perceive everything in the present with full clarity either. That does not mean that I'm a lunatic, that I am someone so fearful of losing people's affections that I will do anything to not lose their affection, that I am untrustworthy and unreliable. And yes, I may change my position again. What makes me change my position? The Word of God and evidence. Ironically, my wife has not changed her position about this from day one, and she has been presented to be untrustworthy because she is portrayed as bitter, unforgiving, vengeful. There is a hardness of heart here that deems us untrustworthy for either changing my position or my wife not changing hers. The only way out going down that path is to hold their position.

Everybody affirms this pastor's qualifications but you and your wife. Everybody is certain that this man is fully qualified, and to say that they all must affirm that he is walking in repentance. A visiting preacher from the denomination prayed for him as a servant of God. The endorsement is clear—the denominational regional leadership affirms him, the judicial committee affirms him, other pastors in the denomination affirm him, and the local church affirms him. Even people who may have been abused by him affirm him and thank God he is their pastor. What is communicated to us with this? First, that either (a) my wife and I are mislabeling this as abuse, or (b) this was abuse but has been thoroughly and completely repented of. If the matter is (a), then whether or not my wife and I go to a different church outside of their denominational purview, they should be talking to my pastors about it. We would need discipline, and we would be most certainly requesting that so we can see the error of our ways. I don't want to go into speculation, but (a) entails that something happened, something sinful happened, but it doesn't really reach the level we are portraying here. What's really frustrating here is that nobody either from the local church or the judiciary committee of the denomination has said to us explicitly either (1) this is wrong and we are doing something about it, or (2) this is not wrong and you must repent of slander. That's why this just hangs in there over our heads.

You don't want to become the next Rachael Denhollander. The pressure caused by the long-groomed fear of becoming a discernment blogger is very real, not that Rachael would be a discernment blogger. This fear has been cultivated for years. My reputation is something I protect, and it is a very valuable asset. I don't want to go on the internet where I can no longer pull this back or put it in a recycle bin. Once it's in the cloud, it will be there forever. When Jesus called me out of darkness, He really did mean that it would cost me everything. I still refuse to understand that. I may walk away from this without a reputation, perhaps even with other, more severe losses. We have already lost dear friends and normalcy in our lives. But the cost of keeping quiet is not something I want to continue to pay. It will harden my heart towards the gospel.

Let it go! Time heals all things, let it go. You left, release him to God and move on. This is well-meant advice by people who love us. Do not even think about them. Well, it's not that simple. We moved here to serve alongside them for the long haul. We had hopes, plans, and dreams. He married us. She was my wife's matron of honor. They know my wife for longer than I have. We have cried together and laughed together. Facebook memories bring back sweet moments from the past. A picture popped up the other day of him with the children of people affected by this pattern of sin on his lap while he read to them the Word. It is impossible to pretend this never happened. Time does not heal all things. Repentance does. Forgiveness does.

I wouldn't have said anything after a long week. One of the things my wife was told by a pastor's wife was that if she were in Angela's shoes she would not have brought up those two subjects that prompted the event in the car in May. Do we see how we as the church we

perpetuate these two things when we interact with the hurting: (1) it was *your* fault, and (2) the leadership is right? An outside observer knows that responding to the two things my wife spoke about in that car in the way our former pastor responded comes out of the abundance of his heart—there were things in there that had been brewing for a long time. Some of them were of my own planting. I have seen how deeply discontented I had been in many ways and how instead of building up my wife to him and praising what was praiseworthy about her, I painted a picture of my discontent. For that I repent.

A father speaks differently to his daughter than he does to other people. One of the ways this is dismissed further is by appealing to the relationship my wife had with our former pastor. My wife's father's presence and absence in her life left a lot of hurt and brokenness in her. My wife found hope in the church as a young woman. Our former pastor was in many ways like a father to my wife. I asked him if I could pursue my wife in marriage. While all of this is sweet grace, it has been used to say that a father can cross certain lines. And that is not right. Reasoning like this continues to tie the blame back on the person on the receiving end of the abuse—if you would accept that this is how fathers speak, all would be well. Let's put it this way—I cannot ask my wife to consider that what she has been shown and has lived through is commendable and excellent and praiseworthy and as a completely above reproach way of shepherding God's people, of being a father representing The Father. If that were true, which we know not to be the case when we are honest, wouldn't there be no reservations at all with us sharing the facts of what happened freely and completely? If it were a Philippians 4:8 commendable thing, wouldn't it be desirable for the women of the local church to affirm how my wife was treated throughout all of this? That this is the right way to minister to a suffering woman who has gone through great trauma and grief? That they ought to expect such treatment from their senior pastor and other pastors when they go through a similar season of darkness? That once they start a process with the denomination, nobody from the denomination would actually take an ownership of your soul's care? That this is what Christ, the Lord, would have his undershepherds do? That once you've been touched by trauma, you become unreliable, untrustworthy, and unwelcome? According to this theory, everyone would see this as healthy instead of abuse. It would be a resounding affirmation from the congregation that everything was just as Philippians 4:8 would commend. We know that is not true.

You have been friends for many, many years! Yes, we have. And I both didn't see this for years, and I also saw it and didn't do anything about it. And I believed when I was told that he was repentant and that it would never happen again. Our friendship should not affect the facts of the matter. Yes, I fully stood by his side as he was ordained into the denomination and as he took this pastorate. Yes, I affirmed his ordination qualifications to the denomination years ago. Yes, but that doesn't change the facts.

It cannot possibly be abuse. If you go through any of the Ministry Safe training, which the church requires anyone working with children to go through (and which our former pastor did not take, at least from the time we required it in our old church until the time I left our last church), you know that one of the big barriers to recognizing abuse is the 'not in my church' thinking we instinctively have. We ascribe all the good qualities we see in people, we ascribe the good we see they are bringing about, and we say, there is definitely no way that this could be abuse, that this could be that bad. We build our own blinders.

This is a problem of perspective. One of the last attempts to reconcile this from the church leadership was to propose a meeting with the elders, their wives, our small group leaders, and us. I refused that meeting because this is not a problem of perspective—my wife perceiving something wrongly, my wife submitting her perspective to three other perspectives and filing charges accordingly. Things happened. She may miss portions of it. She may see other portions of it as having larger relevance. But she has a testimony that ought to be heard.

Perspective implies that there is no abuse here. Thinking how to move forward I mentioned to him that I wanted to read to my wife Ruth Ann Batstone's book *Moving On*. This excellent resource on forgiveness really helped me, but he advised against it because it would affirm to my wife that there would be something on my former pastor's side that would need to be forgiven.

There is no pattern. There is a pattern. This has been discounted, denied, mocked. But there is one. And those who have been affected by it are still affected by it. God has been generous to them by allowing them to continue serving Him in many ways, but I cannot help myself but to imagine how much more fruitfulness would come from their labor if reconciliation were there. Some of them have no path to reconciliation at this time. I earnestly long for them to see God redeem this so completely and to see Jesus magnified.

There is something satanic about this. The devil has been granted a foothold in here, a deep and wide foothold. But we can't just blame it all on the devil. We can't say, the devil came to steal much and he has and stop there. We can't just say her speech was affected by Satan. We have to own our responsibility for giving in to temptation. Yes, the devil has been around, but we are commanded to resist him, and we are promised he will flee. How about we just do that in obedience and hope?

THE THEOLOGY BEHIND THE ABUSE

Well, a funny thing that I must repent of is my overdoing of minor keys and somber music. There is a balance that was missing there in my ministry that I didn't fully appreciate until I did more ministry outside of the denomination and with my Latino brothers and sisters. The church is not made whole because we sing right theology. There are moments for celebration. The other night, I walked into the sanctuary on a cold Tuesday night and heard my pastor sing with his guitar, "Donde está el Espíritu de Dios hay libertad, hay libertad" and like every song in this context, it repeats a lot. The song was almost unbearable to me. It says, "Where the Spirit of God is, there is freedom, there is freedom." The confidence with which this man had to be walking in holiness to be able to sing that with a smile as wide as his face is something that really challenged me upwards. I want to say to you, that I am changing this somber tendency of mine. There is a time and a place to sing of our 'creatureness' and finitude, of our sad predicament before a holy God. But there must also be a time for celebration and emotion and major keys. I want that freedom that my pastor was singing about in D major the other night. I want to be able to walk in that freedom again. Without chains.

I start with that because there is a significant final point to make. Where did our theology deviate from the Word? How did we get here? It would be very irresponsible to dump this on your lap and not give you a construct for how this happened.

There may be more implications of this that I have not seen, but for now I want to state the core tenets of our theology that resulted in this deviation from orthodoxy to cause all this harm:

Caricatures of Congregationalism Leading to Pragmatism

Let's be very honest about it, the elder model of church government *without* congregational involvement if not unbiblical, it is at least unwise. It is based on pragmatism and uses caricatures of congregationalism as voting to even change a lightbulb to justify this desire for expediency. What it creates is an eldership that makes all the decisions and that sometimes communicates them to the congregation to get their input. But ultimately the congregation is informed at best. They don't have an active role in participating. It is this disregard for congregationalism that was a contributing factor to this problem. If the local church had a well-

functioning congregationalism in place and the meetings and ecclesiastical forums for something like this to be brought up, I would hope this would have been different.

Our Continuationism Elevated One Man as Mediator of the Spirit

Nobody in the denomination will preach this explicitly. But we all do it and believe it. I remain a continuationist. That means I believe the gifts of the Holy Spirit are still active today. Perhaps the reader would say, well, there is your problem! Become a cessationist. But that's not the point here. The point here is that in our continuationist practices, there is a subtle thing we do on Sundays—we have prophetic words that we sometimes feel led to share with the congregation at large. In the interest of ordered worship as prescribed in Scripture, one of the things we've done is to ask you to go ask our pastor if you can share the word publicly or not. I'm not talking about prophesy as in making stuff up. I'm talking about sharing a word from the Word that is meant to encourage, build up, challenge the congregation. I have been blessed by this in my life greatly, and I have seen God use me in this as well. What I'm highlighting here is that because in the weekly practice of the church, one man is the person we go ask if what we are saying is from the Spirit, to us golden-calf-makers it's very easy to turn that man into an idol, to turn him into our mediator of the Spirit, to turn him into an inerrant source of counsel and advice and extend this mediator role to other areas of life giving his word, opinion, teaching, counsel greater weight than is warranted in Scripture. At the end of the story, when you get conflicting accounts of events such as it is the case here, who are you more likely to believe? The man who has sat up front every week listening to you and telling you whether what you say is of the Spirit or the lady who doesn't sit up front to do that every Sunday?

Our Complementarianism Silences Our Women

Knowing full well that this is way deeper and heavier than one paragraph, I must mention it for further exploration and resolution. I am a complementarian. I am not seeking a pastoral role for my wife, nor is she seeking that. We believe both men and women are equal in the sight of God, made in His image and likeness both. That both have equality of worth and dignity and are equally important to the work of the Kingdom. I'm not giving up on complementarianism. It is Scriptural. Yet, also that doesn't mean all egalitarians are liberal and have no respect for the Word. I can disagree with the egalitarian conclusions, but I cannot disrespect and overgeneralize.

With that said, the complementarianism that was practiced in our local church has something wrong at its core: *it silences women*. My wife did not have a place to take her concerns. There was always the air of suspicion over everything related to my wife in this—because she had conviction, suspicion came as her being bitter and unforgiving and unwavering. What would have happened if she responded in a sweet, gentle way? I assume she would have been ignored. But if she weren't ignored, what are we saying about the content of her conviction if we reject it because of the packaging? What if she would have used different words? What if she was self-deprecating? What if she prefaced everything with, "I may be wrong, but"? Would we have been praising her for being feminine and kind and gracious? My wife was left after all of this having deep questions about her role in the church, about her voice in the church, about her equality with the other children of God in the local church. She was left wondering if she truly was a church member or if she was only a church member when her opinion happened to be the same as her husband's. What does a woman do in our Reformed circles when she has been abused and her husband is part of it? What does a woman do in our circles when she is being told she is not being a good Christian because she is unable to silence her conscience and must speak up? I have done a lot of reading on this subject because I want to understand better what is happening to women in our local congregations—this is not exclusive to the denomination we have left. It needs serious exploring. We can't keep saying to women we

want them to be broad and competent theologians and at the same time treat them as non-equals.

Another thing of interest here is that almost none of the women of the church have maintained a relationship of care and interaction with my wife. My wife struggles with these ghost relationships. But here is the thing: I know when I run into people at the store that people have questions. I know when I run into people at the store that the questions have not really been addressed. I know it because they have questions and they don't ask them. Some just cry. Others leave cryptic messages. Others just can't believe how this wouldn't be right if the denominational regional leader has been involved. But they are all quiet. There is a silence there that must be explored and understood. We must see submission rightly, not as a silencing weapon.

It hurts. It hurts hosting a birthday party and missing faces that lit up my wife's face once. It hurts going to the store and knowing we don't have the freedom to be ourselves when we run into a precious soul we love who wonders what happened to us. It is my understanding that the congregation was told that we had a support structure. We had some support outside of the local church, but we missed the body of the church terribly in this.

If my wife would have had a place to speak up, even if she were wrong, even if she were completely missing the point, even if she were an accursed, demonically-possessed slanderer, there would have been means for help within the local church.

These ghost relationships really have threatened to warp my wife's understanding and my understanding of the gospel. And we did it to others. We remember one of our sisters in the Lord who after leaving our church in St. Louis had nothing like the baby showers she had for the other children when she was within the fellowship. That's heart-wrenching.

There were pointers here and there given to me about how to lead my home and how to deal with some of my family relationships, especially women, that I heard but rejected without telling him I rejected them. The instruction was to yell at them in situations where I could assume control of the circumstances and assert a role of authority, I would now say that meant control, over them. That would mean (he did not put it this way) to verbally abuse them to control them. These things said about how to interact with my mother or my mother-in-law for example shed light into some of the ways this brand of complementarianism has an over emphasis on authority (perhaps control more than authority) in our context.

Finally, the slander document I was to use to instruct my wife on such a sin was written in such a way that it seemed tailor-made for the occasion. It said slander was a mostly feminine sin with the required textual backing behind that, of course.

Using Counseling as a Silencing Tool

My wife was exhorted to go to biblical counseling. I did not see this problem fully at the time, but I was communicating to my wife (not directly or explicitly but implicitly and urgently) that she was the problem, and that she needed to be fixed. And then, that if she wasn't fixed quickly enough I may not be able to do my job, pastorally speaking. So, there was another reason for deciding to resign—to stop communicating this falsehood to her. Later on I learned that it is typical in situations of abuse to refer the abused to relational or marriage counseling. The problem with this is that “relational counseling validates the idea that there is joint responsibility for the abusive behavior.” What is wrong here is not that there is no need for counseling. There is. Biblical counseling was a sweet balm in my wife's wounds at the time, and it helped us move forward. It's just that dealing with the abuse must happen first.

Otherwise, we are blame-shifting and we are saying that while there may be abuse, it is all tied to the survivor's choices or actions. It is not something done *to them*. It is something they did to cause it. Let me be clear—even if we *were* evil, vengeful, seeking our own vindication, seeking to destroy, even that wouldn't warrant the treatment that was received. There is no sin that causes and justifies abuse. In some of the follow-ups to the counseling, one of the regrettable things was that we (as in him and I) were seeing that all the counseling was centering around him.

Some Other Theological Points that Should Be Further Explored

There are a few final theological points to make:

- Calling abuse conflict places the wrong scriptural framework to address the problem and causes category confusions (slander, gossip, unforgiveness, bitterness). It was very important for me to read *The Peacemaker*.
- Lack of parity in the eldership is a real danger, and even with a confessed commitment to equality and parity in the eldership it was manifested here. My pastor and I were not true equals. It was helpful for me to read Dave Harvey's *Healthy Plurality = Durable Church*.
- Isolation and loneliness are not the mark and lot of the pastor's life. There can be richness of fellowship with the sheep in Christ Jesus with transparency and vulnerability that don't deter from strong leadership and vision casting. It is essential for my friends to read Zach Eswine's either *Sensing Jesus* or *The Imperfect Pastor*.
- Eswine makes many contributions to the conversation. One worth mentioning now is this: "Controversy arises with a heated commitment to one's opinions, traditions, preferences, or speculations from one's priority and agenda. Ignorance among leaders stems from treating these personal opinions and preferences as synonymous with 'the knowledge of the truth.' Folly among leaders shows itself when quarrels form over these personal or speculative issues." I am writing this in the name of standing up for truth. I don't want this to degenerate to a useless *controversy*. We got to this controversy, though, because my former pastor's personal opinions and preferences did become the knowledge of the truth. And not just to me or to my family. This is serious. This is not to cause a quarrel. This is for truth to be found, not for you to pick a *side*.
- Pastors are never to think of themselves as being 'otherly' from the congregation. We are called by the sheep to lead the sheep. An important and short book about this is *Lies Pastors Believe* as well as Paul Tripp's *Dangerous Calling*.
- Finally, Samuel T. Logan's *The Good Name* added highly valuable insight in obeying the Ninth Commandment throughout this whole ordeal. One of the areas that requires further exploration is taking Logan's work into the question of what is the right seeking of the good name of my neighbor when abuse is involved.

WHAT'S NEXT?

That is it. It is my prayer that with this being released, my wife and I can return our focus to the work of the Kingdom. There is much to do. We don't want to get lost and overly distracted by this awful season. We need to get ready to take off again.

My prayer is also that nobody has to struggle with this at the hand of my friend ever again. There are people who love him and his family deeply, as we do. I do not desire for them to be hurt at his hand and walk through life thinking it was their fault, and that maybe one day there will be a way back in to his good graces.

We don't want your empathy or your sympathy for their own sake. We don't write to recruit company in a dark hole. We don't want to just be affirmed in where we are. We want to own

whatever parts of this are on us. I want to own that. I want to be responsible for those. I have tried to show that throughout the presentation. This is not about us going to throw the loudest tantrum to get people to come to our side, or to gain power or notoriety. Frankly, this is likely going to cost us more than what we have already lost. But know this—this is not about weaponizing my wife’s hurts and abuse towards her. We do have an allegiance to Truth, to the God who is truth, and thus, we will not victimize the pain of others by weaponizing it, and we will not weaponizing our own pain. This is not about making noise so that we can blame our former pastor for everything, call him the big bad wolf, and start this big stink. We don’t want to build on a lie “in the service of the one who is truth.” If you detect this to be an interaction with Doug Wilson and Joe Rigney’s *The Sin of Empathy* released as part of *Man Rampant*, it is. This is far more complicated and messier than a simple presentation. So, I pray for restoration, and I get busy owning my part on this to find rest for my soul.

You may not have gotten this far at all. You may have and still may remain unpersuaded, completely unpersuaded. That’s not the point of it.

What would be nice? It would be nice for the local church to not be bypassed. It would be nice to be able to be ourselves, and to be able to not wear a face of shame when running into beloved people. It would be nice to know they have access to information to make a right judgment. It would be nice for us to see how biased we are about this, and it would be nice to follow the advice of the conflict resolution Christian ministry of ensuring fairness in dealing with this. We cannot trust this will be done by people who are too close to either one of us. The goal here is not to publicly shame my friend—the goal here is his restoration. I think somebody who doesn’t know us and who can filter the good, the bad, and the ugly, the true and the false, the presupposition and the facts, can go a long ways to helping the local church know what happened and help her rightly rule on responsibility. From our side, we have forgiven, we are forgiving, and will forgive. The same is true of responsibility.

No agenda for us to push to you here. Seek the Lord while He may be found, and seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all the rest will be added on to you.