

An Open Letter to Faithful Expositors Who are Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ

This is a letter that I had determined to write over a year ago, but it was part of the never-ending project and to-do list that is never caught up. However, the writing of this letter came to the fore again when recently informed of a friend who was ousted from the pulpit that our precious Lord had called him to. This letter is not meant to be a deep theological journal article but is, however, meant to minister God's Word of comfort. For those of you who have been or may one day be fired for preaching the Gospel, it is hard to remove yourself from the situation, to think clearly, or even to know which end is up when you are in the midst of the horribly painful crucible of testing our sovereign and gracious Lord has allowed.

I do not seek to come across as the authority on this subject, nor do I seek to share my story with any malice hidden in my heart. In fact, I still pray for biblical repentance, restoration, and salvation for all who had been part of this stake with which the Lord pierced my own soul. I simply desire to share some of the comfort that was derived first and foremost from God's infallible and sufficient Word and secondarily some of the wisdom shared from some precious friends and co-workers in Gospel ministry. Perhaps your story is slightly different, as faces and names change from church to church. But since the sinful heart of man behaves in a remarkably similar manner from place to place, I will share the story God has been writing in my life in hopes of offering some of the same comfort with which I have been comforted (2 Cor 1:4).

My situation in a Nutshell

On reformation Sunday, October 2010, I was fired for preaching the Gospel, at a congregational vote of the church, spearheaded by the deacons and treasurer of the church. It was the culmination of several hurtful months, even as I first found out about the several months of secret meetings that had been held.

It seemed almost like I was watching a movie in slow motion. Surely, I couldn't be seeing such vile sin manifest in those who had been involved in ministry; leading congregational singing, singing praises to the King in choir, and making decisions on the direction of ministry. Should I have been so surprised when church members shared with me how they were strong-armed into voting for my dismissal, as arranged by the deacons as they were intimidated to, "vote for him to leave or there will be no more church, lights will be shut off and the doors will be barred"? Should I have been taken back when I found out that one year beforehand, when the first batch of deacons resigned and left the church and were confronted by the present chairman of the deacons and treasurer for their sin and divisiveness that one previous deacon had called up the chairman's wife and hollered at her that, "when your husband gets home I am going to BEAT him"? Their true hearts bled through to show forth why they'd have such actions. The prophet reminds us, "out of wickedness comes forth wickedness" (1 Sam 24:13). They were threatening folks in the church to manipulate the outcome, "lording it over them" (1 Pet 5:3).

Passages relating to the people:

I had cautioned the congregation one year previous to my departure, when the first deacon board resigned not to skirt Scriptural authority or we as a church would be in the same predicament again. Yet, throughout that final year they continued to ignore the clear teaching we had gone through by the Lord Jesus in Matthew five to be reconciled and to seek reconciliation quickly. There had been virtually no display of loving their enemy, as they had perceived me to be. Nor was there brotherly love, though they'd say "we love you." After I was fired, I was forced out of my office in 2 days and told that any of my possessions that remained would become church property. I am very grateful for the two months severance package, as minimal as that was. I'd only be speculating if I said that they only did so because of the "wrongful termination" policy covered by our church insurance. We were also informed that our family was to vacate the parsonage within three months (January in northern New England in the midst of snow). Somehow, I fail to see or feel the love there☺

What about all the gossip that had occurred? If the charges that they sought to trump up were valid and based squarely on Scripture, why was Matthew 18:15 ignored, which clearly instructs those belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ, "if your brother sins against you, tell him his fault between you and him alone"? Then, what about the awful fate promised to those who refuse to forgive? We are told that he/she would be "delivered to the torturers...if from his heart he doesn't forgive his brother his trespasses" (Matt 18:34-35). Those who are diligent followers of Christ practice lavish forgiveness, even seventy times seven in one day (Matt 18:22).

What about the warning Jesus gives of hyper-critical judgmentalism (Matt 7:1-6)? While you look at the speck in your brother's eye, there is a plank in your own. Do we judge ourselves to the same high standard to which we judge others? A pastor/elder is to remain above reproach. That does not mean his is sinless. Every church is pastored by men who sin constantly, but they lead their people in a model of confession of sin and repentance, seeking forgiveness for the glory of Christ and the good of His bride. I look at the list of issues people had with me. Were they sins? How could I have let these people down so low and been so blinded to the truth. I brought each of the accusations to many faithful pastor friends, who served as my council of elders, since the church I pastored did NOT have a biblical leadership structure. They helped me see clearly through the fog of trumped up charges that the issue folks most had issue with was the Gospel. Ah, we've finally come through the thin veneer of "you don't smile enough when you wear a suit" and body language, tone and other peripheral (sometimes called 'personality') issues to something we can dialogue biblically about. But that's the problem. Not one person would dialogue about the gospel. The deacons brought up in their letter that requested my resignation "a doctrinal inconsistency between your teaching and the body's interpretation of scripture, namely the assurance of salvation." This is a church whose evangelistic strategy for thirty years had been very "decisionistic." This was the rub. I had informed the leadership before coming as their pastor that I would not offer an altar call, even though I would invite people to Christ regularly, often mentioning for people to talk with me if they had questions about the Gospel and salvation. It seems that the final nail in my coffin was the preaching series for my doctoral dissertation found in the Kingdom parables of Matthew 13. The second

sermon in the series taught people the necessity of examining their lives for fruit of new life, to give assurance of their salvation, rather than a religious decision or prayer or walking of an aisle. Furthermore, it was not just me that folks wouldn't dialogue with about the Gospel. Some of the members who recognized that the Gospel was at stake set up meetings calling for the deacons to explain themselves. Rather than discussing the ramifications of saving faith, they wanted to talk about their personal experiences, as they perceived it. However, those were the issues that were not consistent among the people, nor could the context be verified. There were personal experiences and perceptions, along with assumed motives, yet no attempt in humility to communicate in a godly fashion and to pursue biblical love, reconciliation, and Gospel relationship.

Where's the desire to talk with a shepherd who brings God's Word to His people? If there is humility and a desire to learn and grow and even have our false understandings brought to light, wouldn't there be a desire to discuss these matters? But since many people did not receive our Savior's words, they will not receive ours. "If I spoke truth why do you not believe Me" (Jn 8:46).

The visible church is made up of a large congregation of believers and unbelievers and their spiritual status automatically comes out in life. One of the surest marks of salvation is teachability. It is a confirmation that Thy Word is truth and a desire to obey it, even if that obedience is periodically delayed. "He who is of God hears the words of God...for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God" (Jn 8:47). Rebellion against God's Word and spokesmen of that Word is just an overflow of hearts that are dead towards God. They can't obey, nor do they desire to. The encouragement is that the contrasting response occurs as well. "If they kept My Word, they will keep yours also" (Jn 15:17-20).

Passages relating to the pastor:

At the end of the day, we're looking for a clean conscience: to know that I've discharged my duty before God and people, that I've been faithful to what He's called me to do. No man calls a pastor to a church, even if a church vote takes place. God calls men into ministry and to particular locations, no matter how short their tenure there might be. Jonathan Edwards and John Calvin used to refer to pastoral call to a church like a marriage. In other words, it's a serious relationship to be preserved at all cost, unless the Lord is clearly calling a Shepherd to a new ministry. Have I been faithful at that locale to love people and teach them the Word of God? If I've done that, regardless what accusations are lodged, I can lay my head on my pillow at night knowing that I have a clean conscience with God. Let the ministry answer for itself, rather than make a defense for everything that's been done. Let God defend you rather than man. Aim for the applause of the One you serve, knowing that man's applause many times will not be there. I lived in 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 daily, as Paul ministered to my heart. What is man's flawed judgment in comparison to Almighty God? We are simple slaves of Christ who have become privileged stewards of the mysteries of God and who seek to live conscious of the Sovereign One bringing to light what man cannot. We live in and of our integrity. If you hold fast to your integrity with the tenacity of Job (Job 27:5) let man try to discredit you all he wants. But to the One we serve, "let Him weigh me with accurate scales, and let God know my integrity" (Job 31:6).

Pastors live in a long line of those who are assaulted. Look at the attack on Paul. There was a continuous attempt to discredit him; his speech and presence (2 Cor 10:10). People often want to attack the minister's failures in how he relates to people rather than recognizing that we are sinners in need of change helping other sinners in need of change. They might suggest that he is theologically acute and doctrinally straight but there's something wrong in the broken relationships he leaves behind. The false teachers knew they could not spar with Paul on a theological level, so they sought to discredit him by gossiping about his hidden life of shame. What gave Paul absolute certainty and stability in a hostile environment was the testimony of a clean conscience, "that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom, but in the grace of God, he conducted himself in the world, and especially toward them" (2 Cor 1:12). He didn't tamper with the message and adulterate it to accommodate the fleshly desires of man, even though he could have reduced the amount of conflict. A pure heart and clean conscience...that's what we need to hold on to. That is what gives us confidence and keeps us from living in the past and constantly rehearsing, "If only I had done this, or that" and wondering what we could have changed in order to prevent the inevitable.

Paul tells of the "dangers among false brethren" in his list of sufferings for Christ's sake (2 Cor 11:26). What an honor! While representing the King of Kings, who died for me and placed me in ministry, though I'm the chief of sinners, I am insulted, discredited, unappreciated, overworked, and abused. That's nothing. Though the hurt runs deep, I cannot honestly say I have not truly suffered. I am a sinner turned saint by the grace of God. He is the sinless one who bore reproach unjustly. As in Paul's case, the Sovereign One will minister the thorn to my pierced flesh for His own purposes, even if His only design in it is to grow me in humility, that I might walk in His steps (2 Cor 11:7-10).

Be on guard in such a hostile environment to let "no root of bitterness spring up" (Heb 12:15) and thus be guilty of the same sorts of sins that have gone on unconfessed within the congregation. Every day in the midst of the turmoil, hurt, and uncertainty be proactive to "let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice" (Eph 4:31).

After you have exhausted the means of living at peace with man on biblical terms, abandon yourself to the righteous Judge of the earth. "If possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Do not avenge yourselves but give place to wrath for vengeance is Mine, I will repay" (Rom 12:18-19). God will have the last word, not sinful man who thinks he's in charge. God will purge His church. God will judge evildoers. He will balance the books eventually, even if not in our timeframe.

If you have been faithful to preach the Word when it has been 'out of season' and men were angered that you did not tickle their ears, be grateful for the opportunity that had been afforded to shepherd folks in the truth. Remember that the Lord judges and rewards His faithful shepherds, regardless of man's carnal response (2 Tim 4:1-5). May He receive all the glory for our feeble but faithful efforts!

A fellow laborer in His vineyard...