

# DEALING WITH FALSE DOCTRINE IN PUBLIC TEACHING

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Imagine preacher Bill tells the assembled church during his Sunday sermon that God approves of homosexual conduct. After the sermon, member Johnny urges the elders to stop Bill from misleading the congregation, but they tell him he needs to address the matter directly with Bill. This raises the following questions: (1) Are the elders obligated to correct Bill's teaching only if a member of the congregation first tries to change Bill's mind? (2) Did Johnny do anything wrong in urging the elders to stop Bill without first complying with the requirements of Matthew 18:15-17? My answer to both questions is "No."

## **Are the elders obligated to correct Bill's teaching only if a member of the congregation first tries to change Bill's mind?**

Local churches are to be governed by a plurality of men serving in the role that is variously referred to as *presbuteros* (translated elder), *episkopos* (translated overseer or bishop), and *poimēn* (translated shepherd or pastor). The interchangeability of these terms is clear from Acts 20:17, Tit. 1:5 and 1 Pet. 5:1,<sup>1</sup> but each carries a different nuance of the office.<sup>2</sup>

The work of literal shepherds includes protecting the flock in their care from physical danger. As a title for the leadership role within the local church, shepherd includes the responsibility of protecting the flock from the spiritual danger of false teaching (Acts 20:28-32; Tit. 1:9). An elder must be "skillful in teaching" (1 Tim. 3:2) so that he can direct people in God's ways, which includes refuting those who contradict the truth (Tit. 1:9).

As those who have the institutional responsibility for protecting the flock from false teaching, elders determine who is given access to the congregation as a teacher. Everyone who teaches publicly in a church does so only because the elders allow it, only because the elders have actively or passively given him that platform and access. Therefore, if in that role the teacher misleads the community in a spiritually significant way, it is incumbent upon the elders to stop him from doing so, whether by changing his mind, removing him from the position, or prohibiting him from repeating the false teaching. They also must correct his publicly taught error by instructing the church in the truth of the matter. The teacher was able to do what he did – present false doctrine to the church with the reach and status of a public teacher – only because of the elders, and they must own that responsibility. Regardless of whether any members say anything to the teacher, the elders' duty stands.

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<sup>1</sup> In Acts 20:17 Paul sends for the "elders" of the church in Ephesus. In 20:28 he reminds them that they are "overseers" and commands them "to shepherd" (verb *poimainō*) the church of God. In Tit. 1:5 Paul tells Titus to appoint "elders" in every city, and in 1:7 these elders are called "overseers." In 1 Pet. 5:1 Peter addresses the "elders," and in 5:2 he tells them "to shepherd" (verb *poimainō*) and "to oversee" (verb *episkopeō*) God's flock.

<sup>2</sup> See Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 319-323.

## **Did Johnny do anything wrong in urging the elders to stop Bill without first complying with the requirements of Matthew 18:15-17?**

Given that the elders have a duty to stop the public teacher from continuing to mislead the congregation and to correct his error by instructing the church in the truth, there is nothing wrong with a member exhorting and encouraging the elders to fulfill that duty. It is always proper for Christians to urge brothers and sisters to good works, to call them to live out God's will in their lives (e.g., Col. 3:16; Heb. 3:13, 10:24). That does not change when the object of the exhortation is the elders. Restricting exhortation from the members by imposing a prerequisite on its issuance can make it easier to ignore one's duty, which may give the devil a foothold, especially where the duty is an unpleasant one.

Not only is it not necessary for a Christian to comply with Mat. 18:15-17 before appealing to the elders to fulfill their responsibility regarding false teaching, it also is not necessary for a Christian to comply with those requirements before speaking critically *to non-elders* about the public teaching of a false doctrine. Matthew 18 addresses nonpublic sins committed against individuals not sins committed publicly against the church as a whole.

It is not certain whether the prepositional phrase "against you" (εἰς σέ) was in the original text of Mat. 18:15a: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." It is accepted as the original reading in the KJV, ERV, ASV, RSV, NRSV, NKJV, HCSB, CSB, and ESV. The following clause, which is textually secure, says, "go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone," and Peter immediately asks (v. 21), "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?" So even if "against you" was not original in v. 15a, it seems that is what is meant by "If your brother sins."

The same limitation on the phrase "If your brother sins" is evident in Lk. 17:3b-4. There Jesus says: "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." The fact the one rebuking the sinning brother is the one who forgives him indicates the sin was against him in a personal or distinctive sense. This is confirmed by the statement that even if the brother sins "against you" seven times in a day, it remains your responsibility to forgive the penitent sinner.

False teaching delivered publicly to the congregation is not a sin "against you" in the personal or distinctive sense envisioned in Mat. 18:15-17 and therefore does not trigger the specified procedure. This is confirmed by the nature of the procedure itself. It involves incremental increases in publicity in the attempt to draw the person back into God's way. The party sinned against first goes to the sinner alone. If that does not work, he or she goes to the sinner with one or two others. It is only if that does not work that the church is informed. The process is designed to disclose the sin in steps to as few people as necessary to deal with it effectively. In the case of false teaching that is delivered publicly to the congregation, the sin is already open and obvious to all. It starts out being known to the congregation.

When Judaizers came to Antioch and taught that Christians must submit to the Mosaic law to be saved, Paul and Barnabas disputed their claims publicly (Acts 15:1-2). They did not

respond to this open assault on the church by working through the steps of Mat. 18:15-17. The primary purpose of 1 Timothy was to urge Timothy to put a stop to certain false teachers in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3-4), but the process of Matthew 18 is not mentioned. Titus was told to silence and rebuke the false teachers on Crete (Tit. 1:10-14) and to warn them (Tit. 3:9-11), but nothing is said about approaching them pursuant to Matthew 18. That process was not intended for false doctrine that is taught publicly.

That does not mean that the general duty to help those in sin (Gal. 6:1; Jas. 5:19-20) is irrelevant or ignored in the case of a brother who has publicly taught false doctrine. Where the situation is not being otherwise handled, the duty to love such a brother would require those with the requisite knowledge to attempt to awaken him to his wrong, at least where it is not clear the effort would be futile. But that attempt is not controlled by the strictures of Matthew 18. It is not necessary that there be a private, personal confrontation which is then escalated to a meeting with one or two witnesses and ultimately presented to the church. The shape of the attempt to correct will vary depending on the individual's assessment of whether and how he can best help. There is no basis for insisting that love in that context be expressed in conformity with Matthew 18. Indeed, doing so is unloving toward the members who were subjected to the false teaching in that it prevents them from receiving as soon as possible the truth necessary to counteract the error.

Nor does it mean that disfellowshipping is limited to the personal or private sins to which Matthew 18 applies. The disfellowshipping in 1 Corinthians 5 of the man who was engaged in sexual immorality shows that is not the case. Because that sin was done in the open and not between individuals, there was no instruction to follow the procedure of Matthew 18, but the man still was excluded from the fellowship. As Jay Adams remarks in his *Handbook on Church Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 33:

Obviously, there are situations in which a matter does not originate between two persons and, therefore, does not require the use of all the steps of discipline. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 5 we read about a man who was having sexual relations with his father's wife (that is, his stepmother). It was a matter of notoriety since they were living together; it was not a matter between two individuals, but a matter between the man and the church. Paul begins discipline at [the last] stage, telling the church to "put him out of the midst." He does not go through the previous steps of discipline at all.