

Handling Complaints Against the Pastor

by [Rick Shoemaker](#) on Tuesday, February 26, 2013

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When I was a kid, one of the most dreaded labels any child could receive was "Tattletale!" The strategy of the neighborhood snitch involved confiding in an authority figure by telling in dramatic detail the terrible offense he had witnessed - or had heard about. He hoped that the person in charge would punish the guilty party so the informant could gain some sort of sadistic satisfaction that "justice" had been done.

I always struggled while growing up trying to discern the difference between being a despised "tattletale" and being a responsible citizen who had witnessed a genuine wrong and then reported to the proper authorities for correction.

There are, of course, times when it is wrong to remain silent after learning of a serious offense. For example, if I know of someone who is abusing a child and I keep quiet, I become an "accomplice to evil!" In many states, a person is legally liable to report child abuse. That would not qualify as "tattling."

Look at motives

Motivation seems to be one of the key factors in discerning between a self-serving tattler and a responsible informant. Some folks love to dig up dirt to hurt a person or so they can spread juicy gossip and thereby become the "reporter who scoops everyone else." That kind of attention must be intoxicating because it seems to happen frequently.

The church is not exempt from this disturbing habit. Many times, the victim of the "spiritual informant" is the pastor or a staff member. And what authority figure does the tattler go to with his complaint? Quite often, it's a deacon.

A typical conversation might go something like this: "Deacon Jones, you'll never believe what I heard the pastor saying! Well, I thought you needed to know. And I heard that last week Mrs. Bluhair heard him"

If you serve as a deacon, you could probably finish that sentence with a dozen or more "pastoral offenses" cited by church members against your shepherd. The question becomes: how should you handle such situations according to Scripture?

In 1 Timothy 5:19-20 Paul wrote, "Don't accept an accusation against an elder unless it is supported by two or three witnesses. Publicly rebuke those who sin, so that the rest will also be afraid."

Look for the truth

When hearing a complaint against a pastor, your first responsibility is to be certain that what has been told to you is the truth.

How should you determine the veracity of the story? First, consider the source. If the accuser lacks integrity or harbors ill will toward the accused, be careful not to blindly accept the accusation as factual. In every case, before coming to a conclusion, you need to hear the other side of the story. Proverbs 18:17 warns, "The first to state his case seems right until another comes and cross-examines him."

Next, be sure that what was told to you was not obtained from secondhand gossip but was personally seen or heard. You should seek the testimony of two or three others who can tell what happened.

Church staff members aren't perfect people. There have been and will be times when criticism or accusation is valid. Paul said that those who indeed are sinning need to be rebuked (1 Tim. 5:20). Pastors are only human and, like everyone, they need to be confronted when they are wrong. The accused must have the opportunity to share their story and be considered innocent until proven guilty.

Look to Scripture

Many people who bring complaints about the pastor to a deacon do so expecting the deacon to chastise the shepherd. However, Jesus instructed us in Matthew 18:15, "If your brother sins against you, go and rebuke him in private. If he listens to you, you have won your brother."

Notice that Jesus never said, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell a deacon and the deacon will take care of it!"

Deacons should point the complaining person to Scripture. Jesus commands that a private meeting should take place between the accused and the accuser. The spirit of that meeting must not be to "gun down" but to "gain" one's brother.

Challenge the complainer/accuser to do two things before he meets with the pastor. First, he should pray for the pastor. In Luke 6:27-28, Jesus told us, "Love your enemies, do what is good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you." The complainer may not feel mistreated and hopefully does not see the pastor as the enemy, but the principle still applies. If you are at odds with another person, pray for the person. Don't pray against them; pray for them. You must pray God's blessing upon the offender. It is very hard to hate someone for whom you are praying!

Look for logs

In Luke 6. Jesus also said, "Take the log out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck in your brother's eye" (Luke 6:42). In other words, before I judge my brother (pastor) harshly, I must consider that I may not be seeing the whole picture. A "log" of anger or bitterness or gossip may be distorting my perspective. Until I remove that, I am ill-prepared to address what I perceive as my brother's fault.

Look to restore

The deacon must prayerfully see that confrontation and restoration occur in the spirit of Galatians 6:1. "Brothers, if someone is caught in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual should restore such a person with a gentle spirit, watching out for your=selves so you also won't be tempted." Deacons must understand, model, and teach this critical principle of biblical peacemaking.

"But what if the church member refuses to go to the pastor/staff person even after I instruct him how to do so?"

Though Jesus said that the first step is to come privately, it may be advisable in some cases, for the deacon to accompany the member who is upset. Simply say, "I will come with you as you talk to the pastor as an impartial observer."

"What if the church member still refuses to go to the other person? What if he expects me to fix his problem?"

When a complaining member doesn't want to initiate a meeting, volunteer to tell the pastor that the member wants to talk. Let the pastor set up the meeting. In Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus said, "If you remember that your brother has something against you ... first be reconciled with your brother." If the pastor doesn't know there's a problem, he won't be able to obey that command, correct the problem, and repair the relationship.

If deacons would handle member accusations and complaints in this fashion, their ministry would be far less stressful and far more fruitful!

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