

Character Assassins

**Dealing with
Ecclesiastical
Tyrants and
Terrorists**



**Peter Hammond and Brian Abshire
with Bill Bathman**

CHARACTER ASSASSINS

Dealing With
Ecclesiastical Tyrants
and Terrorists

*by Peter Hammond and Brian Abshire
with Bill Bathman*



Christian Liberty Books

Cape Town

Endorsements

“**D**r. Peter Hammond has written a challenging new book entitled, *Character Assassins: Dealing With Ecclesiastical Tyrants and Terrorists*. Those who have experienced such character assassinations will be greatly helped by this book and the many anecdotal stories that it relates. It is a topic rarely written on and one that I am sure will prove a blessing in the lives of many who are wounded ministers or missionaries.”

D. James Kennedy, Ph.D., Senior Minister, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church

“**I** am grateful such a book now exists. I have observed all too much in the way of slander of godly men and abusive churches which operate by tyrannical control. And I am aware of far too many botched church discipline cases where the elders proceeded wrongly without following Matthew 18 principles, or where there was too great a fear of confrontation and the people with the factual information about sinful behaviour refused to go public, but rather wanted to remain an ‘anonymous witness’, which of course flies in the face of Matt. 18. May God use this book to shake fearful church people into proper courage, and also help define ecclesiastical tyranny for those being tyrannized.”

Dr. Jay Grimstead, Director, Coalition on Revival

“**C***haracter Assassins* is a well-written, much-needed book, which every pastor and ministry leader will want to have. It shines the light of Scripture and experience on the dark dealings of those who shoot from the shadows to destroy the reputations of those in the frontlines of ministry. Almost everyone in any kind of leadership today has experienced the kind of back-stabbing exposed in this book. But, until now, there has been very little in print to give hope, Biblical insights and practical help to those under fire.

“Furthermore, Dr. Peter Hammond's track record of ministry, leadership and servanthood give him a unique perspective on this fascinating topic.”

Joseph Farah, Founder, WorldNetDaily.com

“**B**ravo! *Character Assassins* is a timely and important book by Peter Hammond. It exposes the pathological antagonists who are out to destroy God's anointed, reveals the motivations behind the accuser of the brethren and sets forth in great detail how to discover the truth. *Character Assassins* is must reading. I recommend it for every believing Christian.”

Dr. Ted Baehr, MOVIEGUIDE

“This is a desperately needed book emerging at a critical time when courageous and committed clergy as well as other leaders, not only in South Africa but round the world, are finding themselves alienated, reviled, persecuted and despised by the very institutions and so called leadership which should be encouraging, supporting and championing their efforts to bring God’s message of love, values and compassion to people of all walks and persuasions. It vindicates those who have suspected for some time that churches and other institutions, in many instances but by no means all, have become nothing less than instruments of diabolical social control covertly and overtly managed by malign and sinister vested interests with deviant aspirations and distorted ambitions.

“Readers who study this text will immediately realise that they do not walk alone but share a common challenge. They can take strength from the fact that this problem has reached epidemic proportions on a global platform and now for the first time the seed is being sown to ensure a universal awareness of what is happening, and more importantly, how to address the challenge based on defining common values, determination and strength of character underpinned by the foundational bedrock of a firm faith in our Lord and His teachings. Peter Hammond and his team have performed a vital service which does not stop here but sets the scene for further work in future by creating a universal awareness of the problems, threats and challenges and how to cope with them. The next step is turning the tide.”

Douglas McClure, Retired Civil Servant and Company Director, South Africa

“It is my privilege and honour to highly recommend this desperately needed book, *Character Assassins*, to all Christians who are serious with God and want to remain standing where many are falling.

“This book not only exposes our flaws, mistakes and sins as Christians who criticize, backstab, sabotage, lie and assassinate the characters of other servants of God and their ministries, but it also encourages and empowers those who are under attack and are not sure what to do, or are criticized unfairly and are not sure how to react.

“There are many Christian leaders who have failed and given up serving the Lord because they did not know what to do in times of trouble, persecution, misunderstanding, unfair criticism and betrayal by brothers who were supposed to be on the same team as they were. Their reaction would have been to ‘stand and persevere’ if they read a book like this during their dark days.

“My prayer is that this book will be read by as many Christian leaders as possible, and that they will be willing to change as flaws in their characters are exposed. It is true that *‘a person’s character is accurately measured by their reaction to unfairness and bad treatment.’* We need to die to self as Christians so that Christ may live His life in us and through us. May we ask the Lord to change us more into His likeness so that our reaction to unfairness or bad treatment will reveal a true Christ-like character. To be like Jesus is what we should ask of God more than anything else.”

Dr. Kenneth Meshoe, MP, President, African Christian Democratic Party

“**C**haracter Assassins addresses a great need in the church of Jesus Christ. It not only helps identify a number of problem areas that threaten the mission of the church, but lays out the Biblical procedures for providing a fair trial -- both for those charged, as well as those bringing charges. A copy of this book needs to be in the library of every church leader.”

Larry Pratt, ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church in America and Executive Director of Gun Owners of America.

“**A**s a Member of Parliament and past Minister of State, in our profession it is often said that public representatives fear the people sitting behind them more than those sitting opposite. In other words they fear their colleagues more than their opponents.

“As a senior business executive and past Chairman of national and international companies I know that the most destructive and paralyzing force can be inter-departmental animosities, dressed up as competition.

“Stalin said that the more he got to know his friends, the more he liked his dogs!

“All who have ever tried to serve, particularly in public life, will have felt the dead and paralyzing hand of calumny. But of course we know that falsely accusing people is a sin.

“One would have liked to believe that the church at least was a sanctuary free of these influences. And of course it can't be because the Church is in the front line of the world mega struggle of values.

“Clearly there are those who wish to play against the man and not the ball and will sink to anything to bring down another - even if it does weaken the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

“Churchill said '*a problem well defined is a problem half solved*'. Thus the awareness and insight of three effective and experienced missionary practitioners at the front line of that struggle do us a great service in identifying and helping us to understand and thus solve the problem.

“This book is both a defence and an initiative to not only quell the problems but to lead us on how to nip them in the bud before the paralyzing effect grows.

“As the old saying goes '*...accentuate the positive!*'

“This book is a must read for every church leader, evangelical Christian and all those who choose to serve the Lord effectively.”

The Honourable Kent Durr, MP (ACDP), Parliamentarian; Cabinet Minister; Ambassador, High Commissioner and Chairman of Companies worldwide.

“ This book *Character Assassins* will be of great comfort to ministers, pastors, and missionaries who find themselves criticised, attacked, and confounded in their ministry. It will also help those inward-looking congregations which tolerate dissension instead of unitedly advancing the Great Commission. It will encourage church members to pray more fervently for their ministers, and it will teach church courts to deal with conflict resolution according to the Book.

“This publication will teach you that you are not alone, that to suffer antagonism is part of the ministry. It will help you to recognise, understand, and cope with the stresses and strains which are brought into the Church by members and leaders who are scarred by an undisciplined, broken, and lawless world.

“Thank God for this book. It exposes the true nature of antagonism and shows that, with the help of the Lord, the Christian can deal wisely and victoriously with character assassins and ecclesiastical tyrants and terrorists.”

Dorothea Scarborough, Director, Gospel Defence League;
Chairman, Christian Action Network

“ This book is a great gift to the church. *Character Assassins* exposes the warfare between the flesh and the spirit, between Esau and Jacob. The 'pathological antagonists' which Dr. Hammond and Dr. Abshire refer to are usually those who have hardened their heart against God's voice and as a result find themselves enemies of His work. Sadly, these destroyers sincerely believe, like Saul of Tarsus, that what they are doing is a service to God. Some go so far as to grudgingly admit that the ministry that they are 'exposing' does bear good fruit but the tree is definitely bad. Confusion reigns when Diabolus gets a foothold. Their condition reaches the point where no amount of speaking will convince them. Stephen gave a full Biblical explanation to his detractors but they 'stopped their ears' and martyred him despite all that they heard and the evidence of the Lord's presence shining upon his face.

"Only the grace of God will convince character assassins and set them on the right path. May the Lord show them mercy and grant them repentance lest they experience God's displeasure upon them and their offspring.

"Finally, this book necessitates integrity in the pulpit and Christian leadership."

Rev. Erlo Stegen, Director, KwaSizabantu Mission, KwaZulu Natal

“ If you've experienced the pain, anguish and shock of treachery against your person as a minister or lay-leader then you're not alone. Pastor trashing and character assassination is a heart-arresting phenomena in the modern Church. It is as real today as Judas was in Christ's day, and it is everywhere in the Church. That's why Peter Hammond's and Brian Abshire's *Character Assassins: Dealing With Ecclesiastical Tyrants And Terrorists* is a must read. This book is not only relevant but vital for teaching godly pastors and lay people how to deal with this growing problem.”

Rev. Tristan Emmanuel, author of *Christophobia: The Real Reason Behind Hate Crime Legislation*, Canada

CHARACTER ASSASSINS

Dealing With
Ecclesiastical Tyrants
and Terrorists

Permission is hereby granted to any church, mission, magazine or periodical to reprint or quote from any portion of this publication on condition that: the passage is quoted in context, and that due acknowledgement of source be given. Please also mail a copy of any article to Frontline Fellowship, PO Box 74, Newlands, 7725, Cape Town, South Africa

Typesetting & Cover by Mark Thomas
Copyright © 2004 by Peter Hammond

ISBN 0-9584549-3-0



Christian Liberty Books

P O Box 358, Howard Place, 7450, Cape Town, South Africa
Tel/Fax: +27-21-689-7478 Email: admin@frontline.org.za
Web: www.christianlibertybooks.co.za

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all those ministers and missionaries who are victims of antagonists. May God grant you the grace and strength to endure unjust criticism joyfully and without bitterness; to forgive those who..."insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you..." (Matthew 5:11); and to recognise that what man intends for harm, God can use for good(Genesis 50:20). May God work all your negative experiences and suffering together for good for you who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

CHARACTER ASSASSINS

Dealing With Ecclesiastical Tyrants and Terrorists

Contents

Foreword by Martin Holdt	5
Introduction by Peter Hammond	7
1. When All Men Speak Well of You by Peter Hammond	9
2. Betrayed by Brothers by Peter Hammond	21
3. A Ministry of Malice by Peter Hammond	27
4. Dealing with Pathological Antagonists (Guy Greenfield)	41
5. Sin and Interpersonal Relationships by Peter Hammond	53
6. Why Do So Many Fail and Give Up? by Peter Hammond	63
7. Coping with Criticism (Joel Beeke)	75
8. Conserving the Dedication by Bill Bathman	79
9. Bitterness or Forgiveness? by Peter Hammond	85
10. Dedication and Courage by Peter Hammond	93
11. Ecclesiastical Courts and Judicial Malfeasance by Brian Abshire	111
12. Presuppositions of Judicial Process by Brian Abshire	141
13. Critical Thinking and Judicial Process by Brian Abshire	157
14. How to Conduct an Investigation and Trial by Brian Abshire	207
15. The Proverbs on Gossip and the Sins of Speech by Brian Abshire	213
16. Appendix: The Psychology of Learning and Interpreting Evidence	273
Church Procedure on Receiving a Negative Report	282
Outline of the Process of an Ecclesiastical Trial	283
How Do People Typically Respond to Conflict?	284
Responses to Conflict in the Bible	285
Handling Conflict	287
The Bible on Slander	289



Acknowledgements

One of the really great things about being a target of character assassination campaigns is that one gets to learn who your real friends are. False friends, like shadows, disappear when the sun stops shining. To all those brave friends and co-workers who endured the bullying, harassments and intimidations of the ecclesiastical tyrants and terrorists and remained steadfast - Thank You!

We are also most grateful for all those who evaluated the many drafts, provided endorsements, and helped proof read this book. For all the many helpful suggestions and constructive criticisms that have helped shape this book - Thank You! This has truly been a team effort.

For our wives and children who have also suffered severely from the relentless cruelty of the character assassins we pray for the Lord to restore the years that the locusts have eaten and to comfort, heal and restore. For all your encouragement, love and support - Thank You!

As this is a trans-Atlantic book, please note that where the authors are Americans we have retained the American spelling. For the South African author we have kept standard English spelling and terminology.

Foreword

On the one hand, *Character Assassins* exposes the fact that the Christian church is tragically afflicted by those who seem to have nothing better to do than to tear down their fellow believers with their unsubstantiated and unfair judgments of the persons under attack. On the other hand, this book is a call to repentance. It is a call not to repentance of just any kind, but a plea to those of us who consider ourselves to be Christian soldiers to do more to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3).

Does not the world put us to shame when it notices that we who claim to have the love of God shed abroad in our hearts often spend more time attacking each other than we do attacking our common foe, the father of lies, even the devil? Furthermore, when there is so much to unite us, we allow trivialities to create tension between us, often leading to serious and unnecessary division.

Character Assassins ought to be read with care, concentration and concern. If it serves the purpose of making the following quote by Octavius Winslow a reality, it will have served its purpose well. Commenting on the verse "*And the same day Pilate and Herod were made friends together; for before they were at enmity between themselves*" (Luke 23:12), Winslow writes:

"How striking and solemn the instruction conveyed in this incident! Pilate and Herod, standing in the attitude of the deadliest hate to each other, are now made friends. And what strange but mighty power has thus suddenly subdued their animosity, and turned their hatred into love? What mystic chain has drawn and bound together these hostile rulers?"

Their mutual and deep enmity against Jesus.

"Believers in Christ, if the enemies of our glorious Redeemer, inspired by a natural and kindred feeling of hatred, are induced to forget their private quarrels and merge their differences in one common confederation to crush the Son of God, the object of their mutual hostility, shall not the friends of the Redeemer, constrained by that Divine principle of love which dwells in the hearts of all who are born of God, quench their heart-burnings, bury their antipathies, and draw more closely together in one holy, vigorous, and determined alliance to exalt the Son of God, the glorious and precious Object of their mutual affection? Oh, if Jesus is the bond of union to those who hate Him, how much more should He be the bond of union to those who love Him! Beneath His cross how should all unholy jealousy and bitterness, wrath and anger, and clamour and all uncharitableness, be mourned over, confessed, abhorred, and renounced by the children of the one family! How should all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity be unhesitatingly and cordially recognised as such, thus 'endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Eph 4:3)!"

May we all take heed to these wise words, and may *Character Assassins* deliver us from the sin it so ably exposes and which we all ought to mortify in the power of the Spirit of God.

Rev. Martin Holdt
Constantia Park Baptist Church



Introduction

Along with the rise of Islamic Jihad in the world, we are witnessing an increase in ecclesiastical terrorism. There are those Christians who see it as their calling to sabotage the support bases of others, to launch sneak attacks, ecclesiastical Pearl Harbours, to destroy missionary towers, assassinate characters, hijack ministries and blow up bridges of relationships. These ecclesiastical terrorists seek to intimidate and to sow seeds of fear and doubt.

There are those who have a ministry of criticism and a gift of discouragement. All too many dedicated Christian workers have fallen victim to ecclesiastical bullies and those with a ministry of backstabbing. Pride, jealousy and covetousness, dysfunctional churches and dysfunctional members collectively present a serious threat to the fulfilment of the Great Commission in our generation.

There is a desperate need to expose the increasing threat of pathological antagonists and abusive churches. In order to encourage and empower those involved in missions and ministry who are being targeted and undermined, this book attempts to both expose the problem and to provide practical and Biblical solutions. For this purpose the light of Scripture and experience is shone on the dark dealings of those relentless critics who prefer to shoot from the shadows.

"Look, the wicked bend their bows, they set their arrows against the strings to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart." Psalm 11:2

The goal of this book is to be constructive, to encourage those under attack, to provide a tool with which to expose the tactics and strategies of character assassins, and to enable ministers and missionaries to educate their elders and deacons as to the reality of

this problem and the Biblical solutions.

As Dr. Guy Greenfield has observed in his book *"The Wounded Minister - Healing From and Preventing Personal Attacks"*, every church and ministry has to deal with personality conflicts and intermittent discord. That is normal. However, what we are facing is the "growing phenomenon", "major problem approaching crisis proportions" of "pathological antagonists", and their allies and sympathisers, who launch systematic and sustained attacks on the leaders of a church or ministry.

G. Lloyd-Rediger describes these antagonists as "clergy killers", who have as their one major objective to abuse or hurt the ministers to the degree that they will leave the ministry. Rediger notes that this abuse is "increasing in epidemic proportions...it is a phenomenon that is verified by both research and experience."

However, because this phenomenon is little understood and seldom recognised, these genuine candidates for church discipline generally escape Biblical accountability and continue to cause divisions - to their own spiritual detriment and to the harm of others. The indecisiveness and procrastination of many church leaders, even when such trouble makers are recognised, makes resolution difficult. However, while many church leaders will shrink from confronting ecclesiastical tyrants, terrorists and traitors, some can be manipulated and bullied into condemning various dedicated and effective servants of God.

Most church members would be shocked to learn how pathological antagonists can manufacture evidence and presumption of guilt, organise trials in absentia, when no defence is allowed and no appeal is possible, and arrange a guilty verdict as a foregone conclusion.

The ex-Rhodesian Prime Minister, Mr. Ian Smith, in his book **The Great Betrayal** states: "*We were never beaten by our enemies - we were betrayed by our friends.*" This has been the sad experience of all too many ministers and missionaries as well.

When All Men Speak Well Of You

*Woe to you when all men speak well of you,
for that is how their fathers treated the false
prophets.* *Luke 6:26*

It is interesting how, in spite of all the warnings in Scripture against gossip, slander, and tale bearing, just how much stock we tend to place in people's opinions. It is said that where there is smoke there is fire. However, the smoke may be no more than dust and hot air.

As Mark Twain observed: "*A lie can travel halfway across the world while truth is still getting its boots on!*"

The great Baptist preacher, C.H. Spurgeon, warned: "*Believe not half you hear; repeat not half you believe. When you hear an evil report, halve it, then quarter it, and say nothing about the rest of it.*"

The great Reformer, John Calvin, declared: "**No greater injury can be inflicted upon men than to ruin their reputation.**"

Thomas Brooks taught: "*Of all the members in the body, there is none so serviceable to Satan as the tongue.*"

C. H. Spurgeon wrote: "*The more prominent you are in Christ's service, the more certain are you to be the butt of calumny. I have long ago said farewell to my character. I lost it in the early days of my ministry by being a little more zealous than suited a slumbering age. And I have never been able to regain it except in the sight of Him who judges all the earth, and in the hearts of those who love me for my work's sake.*"

John Calvin wrote: "*There is nothing more slippery or loose than the tongue.*"

The Scriptures command us *"to slander no-one, to be peaceable and considerate and to show true humility toward all men."* Titus 3:2

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice." Ephesians 4:31

Yet gossip remains prevalent within the church, and the arrogance, bitterness, jealousy and malice that so often accompany it generally remains unchallenged.

King David wrote: *"Whoever slanders his neighbour in secret, him will I put to silence; whoever has haughty eyes and a proud heart, him will I not endure."* Psalm 101:5

Today, however, it is more common to publish the slanders than to silence or rebuke them.

Few seem to consider that whoever gossips to you will gossip of you.

The teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ are very clear. *"In everything do to others what you would have them do to you. For this sums up the Law and the prophets."* Matthew 7:12

When we pray we are to say: *"Forgive us our debts as we have also forgiven our debtors.... For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."* Matthew 6:12-15

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Matthew 5:11-12

"Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets... Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets."

Luke 6:22-26

Why then do we continue to place such value upon people's opinions? After all, mass murdering tyrants like Joseph Stalin and Mao Tse Tung have been *"Man of the Year"* of Time Magazine .

"Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I was still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ." Galatians 1:10

Our Lord Jesus Christ warned us: *"Many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other."* Matthew 24:10

Even one of Jesus' hand picked disciples, Judas, who was trusted as the treasurer of *"The Twelve"* took money from the high priests to betray our Lord Jesus Christ into their hands (Luke 22:8; John 13:21).

When Moses sent out twelve scouts to explore the land, ten returned with a negative and defeatist report and *"made the whole community grumble"* to the point of even wanting to stone Joshua and Caleb (Numbers 14:36). Only Joshua and Caleb, of the twelve, came back with a good report. The Lord severely judged the ten complainers and mightily blessed the faithful Joshua and Caleb (Numbers 16:38).

Criticising Calvin

The great French Reformer, **John Calvin**, transformed Geneva through his preaching, teaching, writings and Academy. Under John Calvin's ministry, Geneva became the intellectual centre and hub of the Reformation, a place of religious freedom and refuge for Protestants fleeing persecution. Geneva also became a sending base for evangelists, pastors and missionaries who established literally thousands of Reformed churches throughout Europe and further afield.

Yet historians have noted that: *"No good man has ever had a worse press; no Christian theologian is so often scorned; so regularly attacked."*

Throughout his life Calvin faced major opposition, often from fellow Protestants and other theologians: *"whose objections to Calvin were incessant and, usually, unpleasant."* Even today, there are those who maintain that John Calvin was a vicious tyrant who oppressed the people under an unbearable dictatorship. And that he had people executed for disagreeing with him.

Yet, the facts are: Calvin never ruled Geneva. The city was not a totalitarian society, but a republic with elections and dissent. Calvin held no civil office, he could neither arrest nor punish any citizen, nor could he appoint or dismiss any official. (To argue that his eloquence and logic constituted tyranny, is to invent a new standard.)

History records that refugees from all over Europe flooded to Geneva to find the freedom there that they were not able to enjoy in their home countries. Under Calvin, Geneva developed into Europe's greatest concentration of printers and publishing firms. It became the epicentre of the movement for freedom world wide. Yet Calvin continues to be slandered by ignorant and prejudiced people.

Libel Against Luther

Similarly, the great German Reformer, **Martin Luther**, continues to be slandered to this day. Whole websites are dedicated to depicting Luther as an anti-Semite who laid the foundations for the holocaust!

The accusation that Martin Luther was an anti-Semite, responsible for massacres, reveals an ignorance of history. Luther was pro-Christ and he was zealous in evangelism. For decades he lovingly and patiently reached out to the Jewish people in his area with the Gospel. In 1523, Luther accused Catholics of being unfair to Jews in treating them "*as if they were dogs*". Luther was outraged and declared that such mistreatment made it even more difficult for Jews to convert to Christ.

Luther wrote "*I would request and advise that one deal gently with the Jews...if we really want to help them, we must be guided in our dealings with them, not by papal law, but by the Law of Christian love. We must receive them cordially, and permit them to trade and work with us, hear our Christian teaching and witness our Christian life. If some of them should prove stiff-necked, what of it? After all, we ourselves are not all good Christians either.*"

Fifteen years later, however, the persistent rejection of Christ and repeated blasphemies of those Jewish people in his community, provoked Luther to write: "*On the Jews and their Lies.*" In this pamphlet, Luther wrote against the "*madness and blindness that blasphemes Christ*" in the Rabbinic teachings. Luther declared that he could not "*have any fellowship or patience with obstinate blasphemers and those who defame our dear Saviour.*" These blasphemies included describing our Lord Jesus Christ as "*the bastard son*" of "*that whore Mary*", and even worse. Blasphemy was a civil crime. Luther taught that to tolerate such blasphemy was to share in the guilt for it. Therefore, he proposed measures of "*sharp mercy*" which included confiscating all Jewish literature which was blasphemous and prohibiting Rabbis to teach such blasphemy.

However, to quote these reactions of Luther without explaining their local context of opposing the repeated blasphemies of Jewish individuals in his community and then to project guilt for the continent-wide, anti-Christian holocaust of World War II upon the great 16th Century Reformer is ludicrous. How can any Christian Reformer of the 16th Century be blamed for the evils perpetrated by humanists (who clearly rejected his teachings) nearly 400 years after his death!

Hitler was a disciple of Nietzsche (the philosopher who declared: "*God is dead*") - not Luther. Luther was not an anti-Semite. His arguments against Jewish individuals were theological, not biological or cultural. He was speaking out against blasphemy and heresy, not opposing an entire race or nation of people.

It is most disturbing that such a humble and God fearing man, who, against all odds, gave to the church and the world the Bible, freely available in the common tongue; who introduced congregational singing; championed justification by God's Grace, received by faith, on the basis of the finished work of Christ; who stood for sola Scriptura - that Scripture alone is the ultimate authority; and who was so wonderfully used of the Lord to bring

about the greatest Biblical Reformation and birth of freedom that the world had ever known, could be the target of such vicious slander.

The Scriptures implore us: "*Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the Law and judges it.*" James 4:11

Malice and a Contentious Spirit

There is a disturbing tendency throughout the church, seen regularly in homes where they have "*roast pastor for Sunday lunch*", to set ourselves up continually as judges of those who are better than us. Many have the gift of criticism and a ministry of discouragement. Few recognise how seriously their casual criticism, of what are often trivial matters, erodes and undermines the ministries of those called of God to service.

"Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander of every kind." 1 Peter 2:1

As the Scripture so plainly shows us, slander of every kind is inseparable from malice, deceit, hypocrisy and envy. (The middle letter of pride is "I", the middle letter of lie is "I", the middle letter of sin is "I", so too the middle letter of Lucifer is "I".) Self centred pride is often at the root of our desire to slander great men and women of the past, and to drag down others whom God has raised up.

Jonathan Edwards, one of America's greatest theologians, and a man most closely associated with the Great Evangelical Awakening, was actually dismissed by his own church for applying Biblical discipline. The elders of his church would not accept his position that unbelievers should not be allowed to participate in The Lord's Supper. In his farewell message, Edwards declared: "*...avoid contention. A contentious people will be a miserable people...heat of spirit, evil speaking and things of the like...directly contrary to the spirit of Christianity...watch against a contentious spirit...*"

Condemning Carey

The father of modern missions, **William Carey**, and his co-worker, John Marshman, had to endure vicious and unjust criticisms from young new missionaries who came "to help" at the mission base in Serampore, India. Many of these new volunteers actually split from the Serampore mission and spent an inordinate amount of time slandering William Carey and his co-workers (the controversy lasted thirteen years). So much so that the Baptist Missionary Society in England actually turned against William Carey for a time.

Writing of this, Carey said: *"the evil they have done is, I fear, irreparable; and certainly the whole might have been prevented by a little frank conversation with either of us; and a hundredth part of that self-denial which I found necessary to exercise for the first few years of the mission would have prevented this awful rupture...but now we are traduced and the church rent by the very men who came to be our helpers...judge for yourselves whether it is comely that a man who has laboriously and disinterestedly served the mission so many years should be arraigned and condemned without a hearing by a few men who have just arrived, one of whom had not been a month in the country before he joined the senseless outcry."*

Slandering Samuel Marsden

On a recent speaking tour to Australia, a couple of people commented on my including **Samuel Marsden** in *The Greatest Century of Missions*. They frankly admitted that they had never before heard anything good about Samuel Marsden, but only that he was a vicious "hanging judge" and "religious hypocrite".

In fact, Samuel Marsden was a pioneer missionary and founding father of Australia and New Zealand. He was a man who upheld justice impartially, and who diligently preached the Gospel. Throughout his life he remained a humble and generous Christian who laid the foundations for the Christian Church in Australia and New Zealand. Although he came to Australia as a

chaplain to the convict colony of New South Wales, the Governor compelled him to also be the magistrate. Combining both demanding vocations in one person involved Marsden in one controversy after another. Samuel tried his utmost to provide for the prisoners, to establish a school for orphans, and to right the wrongs suffered by Aborigines.

His attempts to uphold principles of justice placed his life in danger and he endured many threats to his life. On one occasion, he travelled to England to call the attention of the government to the unacceptable conditions and to secure intervention. He presented these grievances to King George III himself.

Samuel Marsden had a great missionary vision which also extended to bringing the Gospel of Christ to the cannibals of New Zealand. Despite vicious disputes between some of the missionaries answerable to him, and relentless criticism, Samuel Marsden conducted the first public worship service in New Zealand, interceded between two warring tribes, and introduced education, standards of justice, and law and order to the country.

It was his sad experience to continually be a victim of malicious and unfounded charges throughout his time in Australia. His fearless denunciation of sin made him numerous enemies, but the Lord vindicated Samuel Marsden. Within 31 years of his first service in New Zealand, 98% of the Maoris had embraced Christianity.

Harrassing Hudson Taylor

In 1865, **Hudson Taylor** prayed for 24 "*willing, skilful labourers*" for his new China Inland Mission. Willing and skilful they may have been, but four of these new recruits also brought dissension and controversy. Soon these dissidents had poisoned the fellowship with their increasing bitterness and resentment. After two years of backbiting and disruption, Hudson Taylor had to dismiss the ringleader, Louis Nicole, from the mission. Other troublemakers left with him.

More unrelenting slander and lies undermined the work of the China Inland Mission. One of the accusations against Hudson Taylor was that he was "*too familiar with the young ladies.*" Hudson and Maria Taylor kissed some of the girls on the forehead before they went off to bed. The ladies themselves denied any inappropriate behaviour, but still the complaint reached London, and for a time led to a fall in support for the mission.

As Hudson Taylor wrote: "*If the Spirit of God works mightily, we may be sure that the spirit of evil will also be active.*" The China Inland Mission was engulfed in opposition, dissension, controversy, fire and death from the beginning. Their mission house in Yangchow was attacked and set on fire. Furious persecution engulfed them. Storms of criticism and controversy erupted. However, in spite of constant controversies, the number of CIM missionaries grew, in time becoming the largest mission organisation in the world. By the end of Hudson's long life, the very mission organisations that had belittled and ridiculed his methods had begun adopting many of them.

Presumed Guilty

On his Zambezi expedition, pioneer missionary explorer **David Livingstone** was afflicted by interpersonal conflicts amongst his team leading to everyone abandoning him in the field, even his own brother Charles. By the time he returned to England seven years later, Livingstone found that his disgruntled ex-co-workers had so spread an ill report against him, that no-one even came out to welcome him back. He was ostracised. Presumed guilty without even a chance to defend himself.

From Outcasts to Textbooks

The greatest Baptist preacher of all time, **Charles Spurgeon**, was actually the target of vicious and slanderous attacks by the Baptist Union of his day. Now his books are textbooks of Baptist colleges and his statue stands outside the Baptist Union

headquarters.

George Whitefield, one of the greatest evangelists of all time and a key figure in the Great Evangelical Awakening, was actually excluded from the Church of England that he had served so faithfully. Today the Church of England in South Africa has named its college after George Whitefield.

A Price of Success

Dr James Kennedy in his book, *Delighting God*, writes *"if you rise just a little bit above the common herd, if you achieve just a modicum more success than your neighbours, most surely those barbs of criticism are going to be shot your way.*

"To avoid criticism: do nothing, say nothing, be nothing." "There is no defence against reproach - except obscurity."

Delighting God quotes one wise old man *"if I tried to read, much less answer all the criticisms made of me, and all the attacks levelled against me, this office would have to be closed to all other business. I do the best I know how, the very best I can, and I mean to keep on doing this, down to the very end. If the end brings me out all wrong, ten angels swearing I had been right would make no difference. If the end brings me out alright, then what is said against me now will not amount to anything."*

An Opportunity to Glorify God

There is no doubt that **adversity builds character**. A faith that can't be tested, can't be trusted. Smooth seas do not make skilful sailors.

But unjustified criticism is still better than flattery - and less dangerous! We can always benefit - even from the most unbalanced criticism. What man means for evil, God can use for good. (Genesis 50:20)

"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." Romans 8:28

Such trials should drive us to prayer, humble us and deepen our devotional life as we search the Scriptures and ask: "*What is God saying to me through this?*"

It can also enable us to empathise with and comfort others who suffer such injustices.

Christians suffering unjust criticism should find opportunities to glorify God and to witness for Christ. Ultimately, God's opinion and approval is the only One that counts. It is He whom we should continually be seeking to please.

And one thing that Christ requires is that we forgive those who sin against us - unconditionally, wholeheartedly. We who have been forgiven much should love much. "*Blessed are you when men hate you and when they exclude you, and revile you and cast out your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy. For indeed your reward is great in heaven, for in like manner their fathers did to the prophets... Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets.*" Luke 6:22-26

It's Not The Critic That Counts

As United States President **Theodore Roosevelt** wrote:

*"It is not the critic that counts
nor the man who points out how the strong man stumbled;
nor where the doer of deeds could have done better.
The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena;
whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood;
who strives valiantly;
who errs and comes short again and again;
who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions
and spends himself in a worthy cause;
who at best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement and;
who at worst, if he fails, at least fails while doing greatly,
so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls
who know neither victory nor defeat!"*

A Test of Character

Everything in life is a test of character. Extreme situations expose and bring out the best, or the worst, in people. A person's character is accurately measured by their reaction to unfairness or bad treatment. The measure of a person's character can be seen by the size of those things which upset him. The true flavour of a tea bag is only tasted after it has been placed in hot water, and so it is with ourselves. Our reputation is what men think we are. Our character is what God knows we are. And this is only revealed under extreme crisis situations.

So, when troubles and tribulations come, when you are insulted, excluded, reviled and mistreated, do what our Lord Jesus commanded; "***rejoice in that day and leap for joy!***"

On the other hand; "*Woe to you when all men speak well of you...*"

Luke 6:26

Betrayed by Brothers

Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness.

1 John 2:9

The Bible warns us that "*envy rots the bones*" Proverbs 14:30. "*Pride only breeds quarrels*" Proverbs 13:10. The Apostle Paul warned of such antagonists: "*He is conceited...he has **an unhealthy interest in controversies and arguments** that result in envy, quarrelling, malicious talk, evil suspicions...*" 1 Timothy 6:4

The Word of God warns us of "*the ruthless...mockers...with an eye for evil. **Those who with a word make a man out to be guilty, who ensnare the defender in court and with false testimony deprive the innocent of justice.***" Isaiah 29:20-21

As much as we would prefer to believe the best about everyone, and as hard as it may be for us to believe that such people exist, even within our own fellowship, the Bible continually warns us: "*A malicious man disguises himself with his lips, but in his heart he harbours deceit. Though his speech is charming, do not believe him for seven abominations fill his heart...*" Proverbs 26:24

The Apostle Paul, in his farewell address to the Church in Ephesus warned: "*I know that after I leave savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I have never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.*" Acts 20:29-31

Harbouring Hatred

The Bible tells us of **Esau** who held a grudge against his brother Jacob (Genesis 27:41), and of **Joseph's brothers** who hated him to such an extent that they betrayed him and sold him into slavery to Egypt. *"They hated him and could not speak a kind word to him."*

Genesis 37:4

The Bible tells us of king **Ahab** who hated the prophet Micaiah: *"There is still one man through whom we can enquire of the Lord, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me..."* 1 Kings 22:8

Herodias, the wife of king Herod, *"nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him."* Mark 6:19

In the book of Esther we read that *"when **Haman** saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honour, he was enraged...he scorned only killing Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom..."*

Esther 3:5-6

When the Lord Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath, **the Pharisees** and the teachers of the Law *"were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus."* Luke 6:7-11

The Lord Jesus taught: *"The world hates Me because I testify that what it does is evil."* John 7:7

Those who are called to oppose evil, or who are faithful in proclaiming God's Word and applying the Lordship of Christ to all areas of life, must expect to offend many. If you testify against evil expect opposition.

"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated Me first."

John 15:18

"Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him."

1 John 3:15

The Rebellion of Korah

The Bible also tells us of **Korah**, a Levite, who *"became insolent and rose up against Moses"* (Numbers 16:1). Korah rebelled against the Lord (Numbers 26:9). *"Woe to them...they have been destroyed in*

Korah's rebellion." Jude 11

Korah and his co-conspirators, Dathan and Abiram, mobilised a large number of the congregation of Israel against Moses. The Bible records that the Lord said to Moses: "*Say to the assembly, 'Move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram'.*" Then "*the earth opened up its mouth and swallowed them with their households and all Korah's men and all their possessions. They went down alive into the grave, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them and they perished and were gone from the community.*" Numbers 16:23-33

The Conspiracy of Absalom

Another traitor written about in the Bible is **Absalom**. King David's subversive son, Absalom, betrayed his father by stealing the hearts of the men of Israel and leading them to revolt against their king. Renowned for his beauty, Absalom feigned concern for the people's problems, sitting outside the city gates declaring his father's neglect of the people and presenting himself as the only righteous judge in Israel. He received the people of Israel with great affection, kissing their hands and promising them justice.

When he had succeeded in manoeuvring himself into a place of favour with the people, Absalom deceitfully asked his father's permission to let him go to Hebron "*to make a sacrifice*". In fact, he intended to proclaim himself king while in Hebron. Although Absalom had earlier murdered his half brother, Amnon, king David, after enforcing an exile on his son for several years, received him back with great affection. But while king David was sincere in his reconciliation, Absalom was not.

Absalom positioned himself by the palace gates to greet the men of Israel, subtly maligning his father to them. For a long period of time he carefully undermined his father's authority. His conspiracy was so well thought out and his deception so complete that neither King David nor the 200 men who travelled with Absalom to Hebron perceived his disloyalty.

"They had been invited as guests and went quite innocently, knowing

nothing about the matter." 2 Samuel 15:11

"Hatred stirs up dissension, but love covers over all wrongs."

Proverbs 10:12

David's great love for his son, Absalom, led him to overlook the many failings and weaknesses of Absalom, dealing graciously with him, even after his great crime of murdering his half brother; while Absalom's hatred for his father stirred up such dissension that it resulted in intense conflict.

The results of Absalom's treachery were catastrophic. Israel descended into civil war and many thousands died in the ensuing conflict (2 Samuel 18:7-8).

The Treachery of Judas

Not even our Lord Jesus, while He was on earth, was spared the trauma of being betrayed by one close to Him. *"Then Jesus replied: 'Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!' (He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray Him)."*

John 6:70-71

Although it has been common for Hollywood productions to deal very sympathetically with Judas, the Bible is quite clear that Judas was greedy (Matthew 26:14-15); treacherous (Luke 22:47-48); dishonest and hypocritical (John 12:5-6). The Bible is very clear that Judas Iscariot betrayed Christ (Matthew 10:4). Judas asked the Chief Priests: *"What are you willing to give me if I hand Him over to you?"* Matthew 26:14. The Bible records that the chief priests were *"delighted"* at Judas's treachery (Mark 14:10).

Although Judas was the treasurer of the Twelve, and feigned concern for the poor, the Bible reveals that, in fact, Judas was a thief, stealing from the funds of the Lord Himself (John 12:4-6).

Far from Judas being a well-meaning victim of circumstances, the Bible is quite clear that he was a malicious traitor. John's Gospel plainly says *"then Satan entered into Judas"* John 13:27.

After the Resurrection and Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, the book of Acts records the Apostle Peter applying the prophecy of

Psalm 109 to the treachery of Judas. "*May another take his place of leadership*" (Acts 1:20). This is a prophecy from Psalm 109:8. The same prophecy includes these insights as to the motivations of traitors like Judas: "*For wicked and deceitful men have opened their mouths against me; they have spoken against me with lying thoughts. With words of hatred they surround me; they attack me without cause. In return for my friendship they accuse me, but I am a man of prayer. They repay me evil for good, and hatred for my friendship.*" Psalm 109:2-5

The Curse of Cowardice

Almost as hurtful as the treachery of the Korah's, Absalom's and Judas's is the sense of betrayal which many leaders feel when those they thought were friends remain silent and inactive. Like the priest and the Levite who walked by on the other side of the road, while the traveller lay bleeding on the ground; many church members, colleagues and associates choose to keep their distance while their pastor or missionary are being savaged by character assassins (Luke 10:27-37).

This is the very opposite of loving our neighbour as ourself and doing to others as you would have them do to you (Luke 6:31). There are always bullies and I have had my fair share of taunts, teasing, being kicked, tripped, poked with injection needles while at school assembly, and being beaten black and blue by gangs at school. Now that I have children of my own I have to help them handle the inevitable bullies as well. What has always amazed me is the unwillingness of many parents and teachers to recognise, or deal with, their children or students who are vicious bullies. All too many children who are bullies grow up to be character assassins as adults.

Gossips are much like the graffiti vandals who deface other people's property with their spray cans, while deluding themselves that they are "*artists*". The pathological antagonists, however, are more like the terrorists who plant landmines, car bombs and hijack aircraft to cause maximum damage to the targets of their hate.

What enables bullies, graffiti “artists” and terrorists to continue to damage lives and property is the heartless neutrality and cowardly passivity of most bystanders. To justify their inexcusable inactivity many resort to a “*blame the victim*” approach, or they presume to find “*fault on both sides*”!

Similarly, when we see those frustrated failures who take out their rage on the authority figure who symbolises what they are not – successful and blessed by God – we should stand up and speak out for those whose good name and ministry are being defamed.

It was all too easy to cheer Christ with the crowds shouting “*Hosanna!*” on Palm Sunday. However, very few spoke up for Christ when the same crowds were screaming “*Crucify Him!*” on Good Friday. “*Then all the disciples deserted Him and fled*” (Matthew 26:56).

Of Jesus disciples, only John went all the way to the cross and stood with Christ at His darkest hour when He was condemned and dying a disgraceful criminal's death. “*For they loved praise from men more than praise from God.*” John 12:43

“*Fear of man will prove to be a snare...*” Proverbs 29:25. The Bible reveals that many people failed to stand for, or confess, their faith in Christ, because of their fear of what other people would say (John 7:13; 12:42; Gal. 2:12). But God's Word is clear:

“Do not be afraid of any man...” Deuteronomy 1:17

“For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.” 2 Timothy 1:7

“But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.” Revelation 21:8

A Ministry of Malice

The tongue is also a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire and is itself set on fire by hell.

James 3:6

All of us, at one time or another, have been guilty of gossip. Yet, it is sin. God takes gossip seriously. The Ninth Commandment is there for a very good reason.

The Bible says that: "*Whoever spreads slander is a fool...*" Proverbs 10:18. We are commanded: "*Brothers, do not slander one another*" James 4:11.

Pastors are to "*remind the people...to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility towards all men.*" Titus 3:1-2. To spread stories that put someone else in a bad light is the very opposite of being "*peaceable and considerate.*" It is also the opposite of humility.

Pride often is the engine which drives the gossip industry. It is a desire to portray people better than us in a bad light, to lift ourselves up by pulling others down. "*Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander of every kind*" 1 Peter 2:1. Slander is inextricably linked with malice, deceit, hypocrisy and envy.

Idlers, Gossips and Busybodies

The Bible warns us of those who "*get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers,*

but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to."

1 Thessalonians 5:13

"We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies." 2 Thessalonians 3:11 "In the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle..." 2 Thessalonians 3:6

It is noteworthy that most of those engaged in a ministry of criticism have an abundance of spare time. Those who are wholeheartedly engaged in the work of the Great Commission, who are diligent in raising their children in the fear of the Lord, and have productive employment, do not have the time to be busybodies and talebearers.

Numerous of those who have commissioned themselves as professional busybodies with a ministry of criticism are retired people with government or military pensions, or an assured income of one sort or another. They may be single people who have never been married. They certainly do not have family responsibilities or children to raise. Diligent parents and productive people would not have the time it takes to be a self-appointed investigator, prosecutor, judge, jury and executioner of the targeted minister or missionary.

"He is conceited...he has an unhealthy interest in controversies and arguments that result in envy, quarrelling, malicious talk, evil suspicions."

1 Timothy 6:4.

Meddlers, Murderers and Thieves

"If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal or as a meddler" 1 Peter 4:15. It is very significant that the Bible puts meddlers in the same category as murderers and thieves. In fact, that is exactly what any obsessive antagonist becomes. They steal from other people's time, they undermine the support bases of ministries, depriving missions of the resources needed to do the Lord's work. And they put other people's lives in danger. Not only do they undermine the health of the target of their

obsession and the health of his family, but they even endanger their lives.

The Law of God is clear: ***"Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour's life. I am the Lord."*** Leviticus 19:16.

Slander can endanger people's lives.

In Harm's Way

We have seen this in our own mission. For over 22 years I have been involved in ministering to the persecuted churches, working in restricted access areas, in communist and Muslim countries, frequently war zones. The dangers in this kind of missionary work cannot be easily exaggerated. In the course of my missionary work in Africa, I have come under fire, endured artillery and aerial bombardment, and been arrested and imprisoned.

In 1989, shortly after being married, I was captured by communist troops in Mozambique and transported by Soviet troops in MI-8 HIP helicopters. At that crisis time several South African and Zimbabwean journalists published reports emphasising my links to the anti-Communist resistance movement RENAMO. These reports aggravated the danger.

Media Hatchet Job

"Baptist Minister Most Important RENAMO Backer" screamed one headline from Harare. *"Peter Hammond, a Cape Town based Baptist minister captured by FRELIMO last week, is the most important foreign RENAMO sponsor to be caught by Mozambique troops..."* The article went on to relate how I was the author of *"Eyewitness Testimonies of Persecution and Atrocities"* which exposed FRELIMO's campaign of church burning and massacres in Tete and Zambezia provinces. Other sensational headlines declared: ***"RENAMO Sponsoring Clergyman Captured"***; ***"Baptist Minister is FRELIMO's Top Captive"***; ***"Missionaries linked to RENAMO"***; ***"The Curious Missionaries With Combat***

Experience"; "***Evangelists of the Right Preach a Gospel of Their Own***"; one headline even described us as "*Mercenary Priests*".

While I was being interrogated by SNASP secret police at the notorious Machava Security Prison in Maputo, numerous irresponsible articles, most of them originating from Harare, spread speculation and slander which further jeopardised our lives.

I have a letter from the Frelimo Ministry of Justice, Department of Religious Affairs, which warned me that if I ever attempted to come back to Mozambique, they would kill me. This was signed and on an official government letterhead. The reason for this extraordinary threat was clearly stated. It was because of my writing and publishing of the Mozambique Report "*Eyewitness Testimonies Of Persecution and Atrocities*" (now published as ***In The Killing Fields of Mozambique***). The media, while I was incarcerated in Mozambique, eagerly reported that I was the author of these accounts. Interestingly enough, those same journalists who espoused freedom of speech and decried censorship, were quick to point out that my writings were "*illegal*" in Mozambique and openly celebrated my capture!

To Prison With Praise

When I was imprisoned in Lusaka Central Prison, in Zambia, in 1987, South Africa was in conflict with the socialist government of Kenneth Kaunda. The landmines and car bombs which were killing people in South Africa at that time, were coming through Lusaka. South African military units were conducting raids of terrorist bases in Zambia, and tensions were high. Nevertheless, when I, and three other Frontline missionaries, were arrested and imprisoned there were still those who went out of their way to ensure that the Security Police had copies of various articles which I had written against communism and communist regimes, my connections with the RENAMO and UNITA anti-communist Resistance movements in neighbouring Mozambique and Angola, as well as my military connections with the South African Defence

Force.

I still remember being stripped and thrown into a stinking cell covered in human filth with a multitude of flying, crawling and biting insects, and being deprived of water throughout the night. Then after a sleepless night in their vile sewer of a cell I was dragged before the interrogators – only to see a variety of my writings on the table before them! I was informed that they had obtained some of these writings from Christian co-workers of mine.

"Expect To Be Bombed"

The dangers of ministering behind the lines in the officially Islamic Sudan were intense. A UN security official warned me that there were helicopter gunships stationed in Juba, and if we attempted to take off with Bibles in our aircraft, we would be "*blown out of the sky.*" Much of the areas we operated in were "*no-go areas*" with a "*shoot-on-sight*" policy. The Nuba Mountains at that time were a "*no-fly zone*". One of our teams was strafed by MI-24 HIND helicopter gunships on arriving in the Nuba Mountains.

At one church service my sermon was interrupted by an artillery bombardment. On another occasion, on a Sunday morning, in church, we were bombed by the Sudan Air Force. The community which included the Frontline Fellowship mission base and school was also repeatedly subjected to aerial bombardment by high flying Antanovs and low flying MiG 23's.

The Sudan government's hostility for Christian missionaries in general, and of myself in particular, was highlighted when the official Government of Sudan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, website posted an article "*Why Churches In Sudan Are Not Bombed*" wherein it plainly stated that "*Peter Hammond should expect to be bombed when he comes to Sudan*", "*he should expect to be shot on sight!*" The article even gave a reason as to why I should expect this kind of special treatment: "*because his writings make him an enemy of the government of Sudan.*"

“There are Those Who Would Like to Kill You”

Nevertheless, there have been several Christians who have threatened to pass on information that would endanger our work there. Some have actually done just that. When Bishop Bullen Dolli and I were detained in Yei, we were informed that an ex-Frontline Fellowship missionary was behind many of the accusations. Several people, including soldiers, warned the Bishop and I not to go to Yei. They were convinced that our lives would be in jeopardy there. *"You have many enemies in Yei. There are those who would like to kill you"* we were told by different people in different ways.

The interrogators informed us that they had been told that Bishop Bullen and I were in touch with the Khartoum government; that we were arming the Moru people to revolt against the Dinka leadership of the SPLA; to separate Moruland from the rest of the liberated new Sudan; to invite the Arabs back into Moruland and to cause a split in the SPLA.

"...he speaks falsely, while his heart gathers slander; then he goes out and spreads it abroad. All my enemies whisper against me; they imagine the worst..." Psalm 41:6-7

There were fears expressed about our safety. Security at the compound where we were staying was increased. Tribal tensions between the Dinka cattlemen and the Moru farmers were exacerbated by the incessant accusations of some foreigners.

"These accusations are coming from your people" I was told.

"What do you mean, 'my people'?" I asked.

"It's coming from white people."

"Well" I said. *"Not all white people are the same. They certainly cannot be called 'my people', if they are so against missionaries."*

"These are your brothers," I was told. *"These are people who call themselves Christians, even missionaries. They used to work for you!"*

Every day more details of the incredible accusations and intricate plot were revealed. The interrogators told us that a disgruntled ex-Frontline Fellowship worker, whom I had

dismissed, was one of the main people making these accusations.

"Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me." Psalm 41:9

Some of the church people connected with us were severely interrogated. Two men, Joseph and Dominique, were whipped with over 75 lashes each.

Even when our interrogators concluded that we were innocent of all the charges, and informed us that we were free to go, we were warned that there were serious threats to assassinate the Bishop and I. There was concern that a petrol bomb or grenade would be thrown over the fence at our huts that very night, and that we would be shot down while fleeing from our burning *tukels*.

"For I hear the slander of many...they conspire against me and plot to take my life." Psalm 31:13

"Their Main Purpose in Life is to Discredit You"

We were informed: *"Your accusers are tireless, it seems that their main purpose in life is to discredit you and the Bishop. Every day there are new accusations. This man that you dismissed from your mission has been in the Public Security Office, even this morning, handing over more papers, with accusations and information to use against you. Some of your investigators are most concerned that should you be released, the threat to your life would increase. There are those Dinka commanders who have been influenced by your accusers so much that they would kill you out of hand."*

"...if a foe were raising himself against me...but it is you. My companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship."

Psalm 55:12-13

"Surely we could be provided with an escort?" I asked.

"There is no escort that would be sufficient to protect you from the kind of people who are determined to have you killed," I was informed.

"Your tongue plots destruction. It is like a sharpened razor, you practice deceit. You love evil...falsehood...and grew strong by destroying others." Psalm 52:2-7

Perhaps you find it hard to believe that there are Christians involved in missions who would deliberately endanger the lives of fellow Christians. Yet the Bible warns us: *"Beware of your friends; do not trust your brothers. For every brother is a deceiver, and every friend a slanderer."* Jeremiah 9:4

You may, like myself, wonder how this could be possible. How could a Bible believing, born-again Christian engage in such a malicious campaign as to place the lives of fellow Christians in such danger? I have been a Christian for 27 years, and I first entered fulltime missionary work 25 years ago. For the last 22 years I have been a mission leader responsible for the selection, training and supervision of missionary volunteers and for relationships with leaders of other ministries. In that time, any misconceptions that I ever had about the basic goodness of man, if not in the world then at least in missions, have been shattered. Instead I have seen enough examples, even in missions, to support the Reformation doctrine of the innate depravity of man.

The Depravity of Man

I have seen several mission volunteers misappropriate mission property, even taking mission vehicles when they left. We have had volunteers not only highjacking vehicles, but even ministries and accounts. Others have utilised mission computers to access Internet pornography.

When I've been compelled to confront and deal with some of these outrages, it has not been uncommon to have the person concerned lie and deny, falsely accuse others, or even to explode with foul language and assault. One individual even cursed and swore, physically attacked me, and declared for the entire mission house to hear that he intended to kill me!

Some have left quietly, only to later take up the role of the pathological antagonist, working like termites to undermine the support basis of the mission and poison our relationships. One individual, who was dismissed for disgraceful conduct, actually

published a newsletter where he claimed that, after much prayer and seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit, he had decided to leave our mission.

"Like a club or a sword or a sharp arrow is the man who gives false testimony against his neighbour." Proverbs 25:18

In dealing with guests from other ministries, we have sometimes been horrified by dishonest and unethical practices and claims. Some, who merely participated on one field trip with our mission, had gone back to make incredibly extravagant claims in their fundraising letters. One launched an entire ministry with an impressive marketing campaign based entirely on false claims and plagiarism. Pretending responsibility for the Frontline Fellowship shipments and ministry activities in Sudan, one individual, who was merely a junior member of a large team with no significant ministry role, later claimed to have been the leader of the entire operation, quoting all our statistics of the Bibles delivered, ministry conducted, flights chartered, as his own!

Another individual, who came in on one Frontline Fellowship mission trip to Sudan and participated in the first few days of one of our teacher training courses, leaving early, later claimed to have set up a couple of dozen schools in our area and requested funds for his *"staff"* there. Needless to say, none of the teachers or pastors in the area were aware of any such activity.

Another very embarrassing situation arose when a friend in another ministry, which we had invited to participate in an upcoming conference in Zambia, widely circulated claims that they had been invited by the President of Zambia, and that the entire Zambian cabinet and Parliament would be attending this conference, at which the President and Vice-President were also going to be speaking!

As we were the ones organising this conference, I was deluged with enquiries from mutual friends and supporters wanting to know more. One person made a very astute observation: If the Zambian government has invited this ministry to conduct this

conference, then why are they needing to raise funds for the venue, advertising, etc.¿ Indeed, why was Frontline Fellowship having to organise a conference venue, accommodation, catering, advertising, or even the programme if this was an official government event¿

On other occasions I have been approached by ministries to engage in activities which we consider unethical. One wanted me to open up an orphanage. *"We are a leadership training and literature mission. Orphanages are high maintenance operations. It's not our calling or focus,"* I explained. *"I'll give you \$10 000,"* he replied. *"It will cost a lot more than that to run an orphanage,"* I responded. *"Oh, you don't need to actually run an orphanage. Just give me a picture of a crowd of children outside some building with our name on a board and I'll send you a cheque for \$10 000!"* After I rejected this offer one of our staff members left our mission and began to work with this group on such projects.

The Slave Redemption Industry

At one time redeeming slaves in Sudan was very popular. A number of friends and colleagues of mine were involved in the Slave Redemption programme. I did not want to question their sincere and good motives. However, my position was that we could not, in good conscience, be involved in placing money into the hands of Arab slave traders or facilitators. I am convinced that it is both unethical and counterproductive to engage in such commerce.

To give a slave trader (or intermediary) money is to provide them with the very reward they desire. Well meaning Westerners eager to redeem slaves with money provide further impetus for slave traders to capture more slaves. Because of the laws of supply and demand, as there is an increase in demand, so too will there be an increase in supply.

There is no doubt that there has been widespread slavery in Sudan. This has been done not only with the knowledge of the

National Islamic Front government of Sudan, but has in fact been encouraged by them. Slavery in Sudan has been used both as a weapon of terror to destabilise the South and as an economic incentive to induce Arab soldiers to go South to wage Jihad against the infidel. The Muslim soldiers and militias have enriched themselves with loot and with slaves.

The question we need to ask is whether, after all the many tens of thousands of slaves who have been redeemed, there is a net decrease in the number of slaves in Sudan? Are the Arab masters now doing their own work in the fields? Are the Arab madams now doing their own work in the kitchens? Are the slave harems now empty? Are we actually improving the situation or merely placing a large amount of currency in the hands of enemies of the Gospel?

Most of the slave redeemers have not spoken either Arabic or Dinka, and have been wholly dependent upon interpreters in country. Most have flown in for the day and did not even spend the night on site. Knowing human nature, and the inevitable temptations to corruption, it is a strong possibility that many of the well meaning redeemers were actually being deceived. Numerous reports were received of people being redeemed who had not even been slaves in the first place, but part of a deception to separate well meaning foreigners from their money. On other occasions slaves redeemed and set free hundreds of miles from home, left to walk back, could have been re-captured by slave traders later.

William Wilberforce fought the slave trade all his life, successfully, without putting money in the hands of slave traders. David Livingstone and General Charles Gordon successfully fought against the slave trade in Africa without, in any way, rewarding slave traders.

I am convinced that we need to combat the slave trade, in every way possible, including by publications, economic and political pressure, and even direct action on the ground, without engaging

in the actual commerce of putting money in the hands of any slave trader.

Well, this was a very unpopular position for Frontline Fellowship to take. We lost a significant amount of financial support over our unwillingness to engage in the Slave Redemption programme. Despite our stand, several ministries even used our photographs, video footage, stories and testimonies, in their fundraising campaigns to support the Slave Redemption programme.

Africa's Forgotten War

When I first started working in Sudan and writing and speaking about the persecution of Christians in Southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains, there were very few Christian ministries involved there. Most Christians were not aware that the largest country in Africa was involved in the longest war still raging, with the oldest community of Christians in Africa suffering some of the worst persecution in the world today. Through hundreds of radio and TV programmes, scores of articles and the publication of the *Faith Under Fire In Sudan* book, the news blackout on the colossal conflict in Sudan started to be lifted.

As we exposed and publicised the Scorched Earth tactics, systematic terror bombings of civilian targets and research of the slave trade in Sudan numerous ministries began to get interested in this neglected field. Some lifted whole articles and photographs from our mission and presented them to their supporters as their own. One individual even launched his own ministry based on a video documentary on Sudan which we had helped a Christian film ministry to produce. On his website he claimed to have led the mission trip, on which he was just a guest with no specific responsibilities. Even the tons of Bibles which we had organised for almost a year he claimed had been provided by his ministry which hadn't even been in existence at that stage.

Endangering Christians

Even more serious than the false claims and plagiarism on his website, he obtained a copy of the broadcast master of the video before we had checked it, and began circulating and selling a version of the video which included numerous factual errors and serious security breaches. When I had agreed to take the film producer into Sudan, it was on the basis of a written agreement that I would have the opportunity to correct any factual errors or security breaches which could endanger the churches and mission bases - before the film was released.

In the wake of the premature release of this uncorrected version, every location of our mission activity in the South, identified in the video, was repeatedly bombed. This included the hospital, cathedral, school, mission base, and chaplains' training centre. In fact, I was leading an Evangelism Explosion training team at just one of those locations when we were bombed on Sunday morning at the church.

The community which included the Frontline Fellowship mission base, high school and chapel was bombed ten times. The Samaritans Purse Hospital and the Cathedral at Lui was also bombed ten times. Yet, repeated attempts to persuade the individual to delete the security breaches from his version of the video were unsuccessful. Instead, he started to threaten legal action against both the film producer and ourselves for using what he now considered his video.

"God will bring every deed into judgement, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil." Ecclesiastes 12:14

"Friendly Fire"

Another man whom we supported for many years, introducing and promoting him to many of our key supporters, recently adopted many of the grievances of several of these individuals mentioned (without even discussing these issues with us personally) and has circulated these slanders to many of our

supporting churches, several of which we had introduced him to. The grief and anguish caused by this betrayal cannot really be described. Those who have experienced this kind of treachery by those they trusted as friends and brothers will understand only too well.

"*Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent - the Lord detests them both.*" Proverbs 17:15

Much of this falls into the category of Christian "*Friendly Fire*" (shooting your own side.) You expect to be shot at by the enemy. What you do not expect is to be targeted by your own side. In the American War Between The States, at the battle of Chancellorsville, the brilliantly successful confederate General Stonewall Jackson was shot by his own side. When Jackson died as a result of these wounds, inflicted by *friendly fire*, the cause of the Confederates was doomed.

Many military historians are of the opinion that had Stonewall Jackson been alive at The Battle of Gettysburg, the Confederates would have won. Up until that time the army of Virginia had won every battle. However, at Gettysburg, Lee's generals failed to secure the high ground after the first day. Jackson, had he been there, would have fulfilled Lee's orders and secured the high ground. That night the Union forces moved in and began to entrench themselves on the high ground. Even at that point, Stonewall Jackson would have moved to outflank them or retired to choose to fight on ground more favourable to them.

His successors, however, went into the same kind of trap Lee and Jackson had set for the Union forces at Fredericksburg. The devastating result of Pickett's charge - courageous but futile - cost the South the war.

The consequences of *friendly fire* continue to be devastating to the cause of fulfilling the Great Commission to this day .

Dealing With Pathological Antagonists

Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self condemned. Titus 3:10-11

Some years ago we witnessed an extraordinary campaign of hate and slander launched by disgruntled ex-members against an outstanding mission in South Africa. Salvos of letters, articles, e-mails and phone calls were launched. Websites dedicated to slandering this mission were set up. All manner of vindictive abuse was unleashed against this fine Christian community. I was astounded at the persistence, obsession and unconstructive malice of the antagonists. "***Mission of Hate***"; "***Mission of Fear***"; "***I escaped from the Mission from Hell!***" screamed the newspaper and magazine headlines.

Soon I learned of other ministries overseas who were also victims of pathological antagonists. Then we became targets of similar campaigns. On one ministry tour to the USA I was given a book which deals with this phenomenon. This chapter is a review of the book *The Wounded Minister – healing from and preventing personal attacks* by Dr. Guy Greenfield, which deals with this growing threat to ministries, churches and missions:

Every church and ministry has to deal with personality conflicts and intermittent discord. The writer of this book considers that normal. However, what he deals with in *The Wounded Minister* is the "growing phenomenon", "major problem

approaching crisis proportions" of "pathological antagonists" and their allies and sympathisers who launch systematic and sustained attacks on the leader of a church or ministry.

Clergy Killers

Dr. Kenneth Haugk, a clinic psychologist, defines pathological antagonists as *"individuals who, on the basis of non-substantive evidence, go out of their way to make insatiable demands, usually attacking the person or performance of others. These attacks are selfish in nature, tearing down rather than building up, and are frequently directed against those in a leadership capacity."*

G. Lloyd-Rediger describes these antagonists as *"clergy killers", who have as their one major objective to abuse or hurt the minister to the degree that he will leave the ministry. Rediger notes that this abuse is "increasing in epidemic proportions ... it is a phenomenon that is verified by both research and experience."* He identifies clergy killers as *"people who intentionally target pastors for serious injury or destruction."*

Common Features

These researchers have noted certain common features in the modus operandi of pathological antagonists:

1. There is always a set of problems in the church or ministry which serves as a background. The antagonist begins identifying the minister as the cause of the problems. (These problems may include finance, inter-staff conflict, a mailing, a popular staff person resigning, *"it does not really matter what the problems are."* In most cases, the minister is blamed).
2. *"One person seems to get the criticism train rolling. One person takes it upon himself to begin pointing out these 'serious problems that are hurting our church.' Phone calls are made ... letters are written ..."*
3. *"Often the person who leads the complaint charge takes several weeks, maybe months, to marshall sympathetic support for his position. Unsuspecting people begin to wonder whether there may be some truth to the complainers accusations."*

4. *"In many cases the initial accuser enlists a few key leaders to plan some meetings to be held at his or a sympathiser's home. These meetings are secret, that is 'invitation only' meetings of people who the accuser believes will agree with his accusations. The primary purpose is to gather support for the eventual attack on their minister ... gathering additional evidence that the minister is to blame for the church's problems. Meticulous notes are usually taken by the accuser or one he designates to do this."*
5. *"They will try to build a paper trail of accusations with which to charge the minister with inefficiency, poor leadership, lazy work habits, questionable moral behaviour or unChristian attitude. An often-heard complaint is 'oh, it's not so much what he does or says that is so bad, it's the way he does or says it.' The way is seldom explained; it is just assumed to be bad, unhealthy, conflicting, inappropriate, unkind or harsh."*
6. *"The accusing leader plans his attack very carefully ... he turns on his charm to win the friendship and support" of key people.*
7. *"The clergy killer knows he must work through recognised authority ... to accomplish his goal of getting rid of the minister. When he knows he has their backing, he will move swiftly, with careful calculation."*
8. *"The attack has actually been going on for some time, but the clergy killer, when the time is right, gets his plan of attack on the agenda of the official board of his church. He arranges for the minister not to be present."*
9. *"At this crucial meeting, the clergy killer lays his charges before the assembled body of lay leaders. He will use 'statistics' to bolster his accusations."*
10. *"When the statistics are interpreted negatively, the finger of blame is pointed at the minister. The bottom line of the charges is very simple: if we get rid of our minister, all of our problems will be solved."*
11. *"He will probably try to get a special committee appointed (hopefully his friends) to visit the minister in his office as soon as possible to pressure him to resign quietly 'for the sake of the church's unity and future'. By this time ... many ministers have been so harassed and*

worn out emotionally by all the accusations (by phone calls, letters ... personal visits and rumours) that they will go as quickly and quietly as possible."

12. *"It is possible that open conflict will explode ..."*
13. *"The abused clergy person usually goes into a clinical depression ... his wife and children also feel rejected ... the 'collateral damage' can be quite heavy and devastating."*
14. *"Abused clergy are frequently abandoned and treated as if they now have some dread disease, and their friends, colleagues and superiors keep their distance. Rarely does anyone come to their aid."*

Characteristics of Pathological Antagonists

Who are these clergy killers? *"These are not normal people, average complainers, critics and typical dissidents who are generally unhappy about life itself ... they are deadly and have a knack for gathering a following of ordinary folk with common complaints and disagreements in the church. They can easily create the illusion that there are hordes of people against the pastor. They are masters at using the tyrannical 'they' in their comments: 'They are very unhappy about ...' or the illusive 'people': 'people are saying that' These are verbal instruments in the arsenal that they use to destroy a minister."*

Dr. Greenfield describes pathological antagonists/clergy killers, as persons with *"a very mean-spirited disposition ... they are destructive. The damage that they want to inflict is intentional and deliberate. They are not out simply to disagree ... they want to inflict pain and damage persons. ... clergy killers are determined. They are headstrong and will stop at nothing. They may pause for a time, change strategies, even go underground to reconnoitre, but they will come back with a vengeance to continue the intimidation; networking and breaking all rules of decency to accomplish their destructive objectives. For them, their plans have priority over all other programmes of the church. These persons are deceitful ... masters of manipulation, camouflage, misrepresentation and accusing others of their own atrocious deeds ... experts at twisting facts. ... maybe mentally disordered; but they do not*

yield to patience or love, nor do they honour human decency. Apparently clergy killers carry around a lot of internal pain, confusion, anger, and even rage. Spiritual leaders ... become available scapegoats for this pain and confusion, which is unidentified and untreated."

"Clergy killers are masters of intimidation, using it to violate the rules of decency and caring that most Christians try to follow. Intimidation is a powerful weapon ... therefore, ministers and their supporters are easily intimidated by these persuasive and charming religious assailants. Clergy killers are experts of disguise when they see it would be to their advantage. They are able to present themselves as pious, devout and spiritual church members, who are doing their destructive work 'for the good of the church to advance God's Kingdom.' They can convince naïve church members that they are raising legitimate issues. These religious monsters often hide among their allies of opportunity ... they openly intimidate any opposition by making it clear that they will fight dirty and use any tactic to accomplish their goals. Gentle and peace-at-any-price church members are quickly sidelined by such threats, leaving ministers and those who support them to cope with the problem the best way they can."

"Clinically speaking, ... they may possess distinct personality disorders ... anti-social, borderline paranoid, narcissistic ... others have learnt to throw tantrums to get their selfish ways. They've learnt how to distract, confuse, lie and seduce to do harm to the vulnerable."

"Clergy killers wound or destroy either by direct attacks or by inciting others to inflict the wounds. Sometimes they induce victims to self-destruct, by harassing them to the point of frustration and anger. ... it only takes one or two in the church to create havoc and bedlam. Because these people live in denial as to their true nature, they would not see themselves in this chapter, even if they were to read it. Clergy killers have surrounded and insulated themselves with a whole array of defense mechanisms and justifications for their actions. They firmly believe that what they are doing in harming and terminating a minister is the right thing to do. For them, it is the will of God. Nevertheless, they are sick and mean people."

What is a Pathological Antagonist?

A pathological antagonist is an intransigent person of antagonistic disposition.

1. *"The arguments of a pathological antagonist are usually found in little or terribly misrepresented evidence ... quibbling over petty details, offering strong proof of irrelevant points ... exaggerating the position of one's opponent ... making an accusation that cannot be disproved and then claiming that this makes it true ... outright lying or falsification. An antagonist, in his attempt to make the kill, will take certain facts and so twist them that they are blatantly false when presented. In time he convinces himself that his twisted facts are true."*
2. *Pathological antagonists are "hyper-sensitive to any word or action, even trivial oversights, so that he takes these things as a personal attack and responds aggressively."*
3. *"The pathological antagonist is never satisfied. His demands are insatiable. No amount of accommodation on the minister's part will ever suffice. Attempts at appeasement will not calm him down, but will encourage him to make more demands. ... he is persistent and unstoppable."*
4. *"The pathological antagonist will lead a campaign of attack on the minister ... not trying to give constructive criticism ... his goal is nothing short of control, no matter what it may cost the minister or the church. The antagonist is so full of rage that he feels compelled to attack the enemy (the minister) until he is destroyed (terminated and eliminated from the scene)."*
5. *"This person probably has a God problem. He feels some deep-seated anger towards God for some reason out of his past experiences. Because it is difficult to show anger directly towards God, the pathological antagonist chooses the minister, the 'man of God', as his target. Sometimes this anger is guilt-driven (possibly due to some hidden sin) ... a smokescreen to cover his own moral indiscretions."*
6. *"The attacking behaviour of a pathological antagonist is selfish in nature ... this person is rarely interested in authentic spiritual goals. If one rationale no longer works to his advantage, he will devise another"*

- ... his stated reasons for opposition are a ruse for his own hidden agenda. What he really wants is power, control, status and authority."*
7. *"The attacks ... are for destruction rather than construction. The antagonists' actions divide the church; they do not pull the people together."*

Dr. Greenfield distinguishes between four types of pathological antagonists.

Hard-core Antagonists

"Seriously disturbed people ... out of touch with reality ... paranoid ... which is not easy to detect ... can appear normal either some or most of the time ... incredible persistence and an extreme desire to make trouble, even enjoying their sadistic inclinations. One can easily spot one of these individuals by the smirk often seen on his face, especially noticeable after he makes a cynical or snide remark ... hard-core antagonists will go to any length and expense to wreak havoc on their targets ... they are fighting a Jihad, a holy war, and the minister is the enemy. They believe they are doing God a favour. Their inner rage is baptised with the aura of holy zeal. Without a doubt, the hard-core antagonist is slippery and dangerous. He cannot be reasoned with. The Apostle Paul may have had these kind of people in mind when he warned the Ephesian elders about 'savage wolves' infiltrating the congregation and 'not sparing the flock' (Acts 20:28-29)."

Major Antagonists

These are not as severely disturbed. "If the hard-core antagonist cannot be reasoned with because of emotional instability, the major antagonist refuses to be reasoned with. Reason is within his capacity, but he knows that if he uses it, he may be defeated or proved wrong. So, to protect his position, he simply refuses to be reasonable and his demands are insatiable. This individual probably has a character or personality disorder, seen in the heavy load of anger he carries about ... personality problems ... deep-seated. A major antagonist does not want to change,

since change is threatening to him. He has built a defensive wall around himself, labelled 'I am right, what I'm doing is right'."

Moderate Antagonists

These lack the self-starting quality of the first two types ... the moderate antagonist initiates trouble only if the opportunity presents itself – however, he will quickly follow a hard-core or a major antagonist in causing trouble – but he lacks the perseverance of the other two. He has personality problems, but they are not as severe as those of the hard-core or the major types.

Well-intentioned Dragons

They have goals which may "allegedly be in the best interests of the church, but their methods and attitudes are still those of a dragon, doing more harm than good, undermining the ministry of the church without consciously intending to do so."

Dr. Greenfield notes that while all of the above four types are *"malevolent in both intent and effect.. I'm distinguishing here somewhat between degrees of meanness."*

Dr. Greenfield also makes clear that he is not referring to persistent activists who are devoted to a worthy cause, for example – the Pro-Life / Anti-abortion crusade. Activists are *"issue orientated, not person centred as the pathological antagonists are."*

"Pathological antagonists possess an insatiable desire to drag problems out interminably, eventually wearing down the target of opposition. Pathological antagonists precipitate conflict that is unhealthy and destructive."

Pathological antagonists are "negative and critical ... legalistic and intransigent ... quick to point out other's faults and shortcomings ... well-known for their judgmental attitude ... very picky about trivial details ... one long story of unhappiness ..."

Dr. Greenfield writes: *"Over the years I have noticed that persons who tended to be failures in their chosen careers were inclined to come into the church and take key leadership roles while exercising a strong*

controlling modus operandi ... although they were failures outside the church, they could be somewhat important in the church."

Allies of Pathological Antagonists

"A pathological antagonist tends to attract certain followers. Without them, the antagonist's efforts would fizzle out. He usually does not have the courage to go it alone. He needs followers to bolster his campaign against the minister ... calculating in his enlistment of a small band of followers. Each had a personal axe to grind ... the passive nature of other church leaders simply allowed this to happen."

The *Wounded Minister* also notes that the greatest ally of pathological antagonists, and the greatest enemy of spiritual leaders, are the passive.

He quotes Cicero: ***"There are two kinds of injustice: the first is found in those who do an injury, the second in those who fail to protect another from injury when they can."***

Those who do an injury are motivated either by meanness or psychopathy. Those who stand by and allow it to happen are motivated either by cowardice or indifference.

Edmund Burke noted: ***"All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing."***

Those who are intimidated by powerful and persuasive antagonists enable clergy abuse. The antagonists see this passivity as an open invitation to continue their assaults and they become even more bloodthirsty.

It is also noted that, while the targets of the antagonist are frequently too busy to do their homework and respond to the vast amount of accusations, the pathological antagonists always have an excessive amount of free time. *"The antagonists have tended to be retired people ... such as those with a military pension ... with a lot of free time on their hands ..., the antagonists had plenty of time to plan their strategy, organise their supporters, hold secret meetings with their friends and spend numerous hours telephoning people to get the vote out for key meetings."*

When the minister can come up with the documentation and the facts to refute any number of the accusations thrown at him, the antagonist simply changes the subject and tries another attack. There are normally no apologies or any acknowledgement of the damage they have done.

"This reminds me of the typical hit and run driver who never pays for his crime. Unlike the driver, however, the antagonist actually enjoys doing this sort of thing."

Biblical Precedents

The classical Biblical precedent is Judas Iscariot. Judas was the treasurer of the disciples, obviously a trusted person. "*Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot*" Luke 22:3. It is not incidental that the basic meaning of Satan is "*accuser*", which is the primary role of an antagonist.

The Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 10:13 of: "*False apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ*"; "*Super apostles*" who have a "*different spirit*" and are embroiling the church in "*quarrelling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit and disorder.*" The Apostle Paul writes that his ministry had been for "*building up and not for tearing down.*" Paul rebukes the Corinthian Christians for not having defended him in the face of these antagonists.

Another Biblical example is Diotrephes written about in John's third letter. John characterised this antagonist as one "*who liked to put himself first*" and "*does not acknowledge our authority.*" Diotrephes was "*spreading false charges against us.*"

John concludes with this appeal: "*Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.*"

Collateral Damage to the Church

The underhand tactics of pathological antagonists are "*a lot like throwing a hand grenade ... it may wound or kill the minister, but a lot of*

other people and other aspects of the church's ministry will be damaged or destroyed as well. A sad note about this is that pathological antagonists don't really care what damage they do."

Those involved in angry, grumpy, critical and disgruntled gossip sessions and those trying to placate them will naturally have little time left for serious spiritual work. **"A major casualty of minister abuse is the church's evangelistic outreach."** But *"antagonists are always right. Loss of members, contributions and spiritual fervour is, for the self-appointed judges of the ministry, always the minister's fault."*

"Churches that abuse their ministers are not growing churches. They either stagnate or eventually die, if not in numbers, at least in spirit."

Wounded Ministers observes that *"when a church is more concerned with its internal operations ... than it is with ministry, it becomes vulnerable ... churches that are more committed to winning new converts and discipling them in the faith ... will be less vulnerable to Satan's attacks. Outreach, evangelism, ministry and missions will keep a congregation on its knees in prayer. Satan can more easily invade a church that is consumed with secondary matters."*

The Curse of Appeasement

"When the good, prayerful, dedicated, loving lay leaders are afraid of conflict in the church and have no stomach for challenging" pathological antagonists, they "will choose a philosophy of appeasement rather than reasonable confrontation ..." However, when targets plead for help from those not involved in the campaign of hate, they are normally *"met with unbelief that there were any evil intentions to get rid of the minister."*

This naivety fuels and encourages the pathological antagonist to press on with his obsessive campaign.

Scriptural Solutions

Dr. Greenfield writes: *"The Bible wisely sets limits on the criticism of a minister. Paul directed Timothy in the churches under his charge: 'never accept any accusation against an elder, except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest also may stand in fear.'" 1 Timothy 5:19-20. Legitimate accusations must be supported by two or three witnesses, and must be clearly recognised as sinful behaviour by the church. If these criteria are not met, Paul implies that the accuser must be rebuked for violating Scriptural standards."*

"A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrong doing in connection with any offense that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained. If a malicious witness comes forward to accuse someone of wrongdoing, then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the Lord . . . the judges shall make a thorough enquiry. If the witness is a false witness, having testified falsely against another, then you shall do to the false witness just as the false witness had meant to do to the other. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. The rest shall hear and be afraid." Deuteronomy 19:15-20

(These extracts are from *The Wounded Minister – healing from and preventing personal attacks* by Dr. Guy Greenfield, published by Baker, 2002)

"He is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and arguments that result in envy, quarrelling, malicious talk, evil suspicious and constant friction between men of corrupt mind." 1 Timothy 6: 4-5

"But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless. Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned." Titus 3:9-11

Sin and Interpersonal Relationships

If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out, or you will be destroyed by each other.
Galatians 5:15

The number one reason for missionaries failing and giving up is interpersonal conflict. Interpersonal conflicts are a primary source of disruption in Christian ministries and churches.

Some come to the field with serious character flaws, fears and phobias, which lead to major relationship problems. There are dependent people who need constant support and direction and, rather than contribute to the team, they sap its energy.

On the other extreme, there are the independent people, the lone rangers, who divert the team's energy as they yank this way and that to pursue their own agendas.

Missions need interdependent people, team players, who are willing to relinquish their own agenda and interests for the good of the team. They are self-starters, self-reliant in the healthy sense, and able to reach out and be a support to others (Galatians 6:2-5).

In a media-saturated culture, with severely dysfunctional families, there are more and more people with severe emotional instability. Those touchy and explosive people who are prone to mood swings, easily upset by irritations, riding the emotional 'big dipper' into periods of discouragement and depression, are becoming more and more common.

Most homes have no discipline. Most schools have no

discipline. Most churches have no discipline. So it should not surprise us that so many people applying for missions are lacking self-discipline and need to be prodded by a whole regiment of rules and constant supervision, in order to function.

It is a rare blessing to have missionary volunteers, who come with a humble, teachable, servant attitude of: "*How can I help you? How can I fit in with your plans?*"

Called and Consecrated

There are two things that any mission organisation has to look for in their candidates: first, evidence of a clear call; and secondly, a strong devotional life.

On the field, much of the support which we become used to, our home church, pastor, conferences, study groups, multitudes of books, magazines, radio programmes, audio cassettes, etc. are often not available. For strength and growth, every missionary must be able to draw directly from God and His Word. In difficult and often hot environments, where they are constantly ministering, but seldom being ministered to, it is very common for missionaries to become spiritually depleted.

Those missionary candidates, who do not have clear evidence of the reality and power of the Holy Spirit in their lives, should not be sent out to the mission field.

When I asked my father-in-law, Rev. Bill Bathman, a veteran missionary with over 50 years experience in missions behind him, what made the difference between success and failure in missions, his response was that **successful missionaries are those who are wholeheartedly surrendered and dedicated to Christ, with a definite assurance of their call.** By way of contrast, he had noted that many of those who failed were those who may have been moved and inspired by the example of others, but they were not necessarily called of God. Therefore, they were easily disillusioned and tended to give up when faced with too much pressure or too many problems.

Humble and Teachable

Dr. Thomas Hale, a medical missionary to Nepal since 1970, and the author of *On Being a Missionary*, observes: "Some mission organisations today may be catering too much to new missionary recruits. After the sales pitch, the candidate begins to enjoy the attention. Things like 'submission to leadership' are played down, while things like 'self-expression' and 'self-fulfilment' are played up. The new missionary comes out to the field expecting full autonomy from day one, and when his ideas are overridden, he cries: 'Authoritarianism', which is a very bad name indeed. And the new missionary launches out on a journey of discontent and dissension, which may well lead to the destruction of his missionary team. What is lacking? Above all, humility ... teachability and open mindedness." **"Pride only breeds quarrels..."** Proverbs 13:10

Under Authority

He also asserts that one's call: "must be confirmed by one's local church. There are lots of lone rangers out loose in the world, who have 'gotten called' to do this or that. But they don't fit in with anyone. They are often disruptive to the work of others ... there is no place for totally independent missionaries ... the sending church must share in this call; they have the duty to examine the call and modify it as necessary. And together with the missionary, they will need to evaluate the results of the call. An isolated call in itself never justifies a missionary's activities."

Trained and Loyal

"Anyone who ventures into cross-cultural missions without some kind of preparation is nuts ... no-one should begrudge the time spent in such preparation. It will cut out half the stress on arrival on the field, keep oneself from making needless mistakes and make one a much better missionary." This training would also have to include practical experience. "One month of good practical training can be worth a year of book work."

Dr. Hale adds: "Once you have chosen and been accepted, then enter into the life of the mission wholeheartedly. You're not an employee, you're

a family member. You be loyal to them; they'll be loyal to you."

Tried and Tested

Hale insists that missions must develop suitable screening programmes. The single most important factor for predicting one's future missionary performance, is one's past performance as a Christian. Missionary candidates must be tried, tested and proven.

"All missionaries, tent makers included, must be answerable to a church or churches. And on the field, they need to be linked with other Christians, and if possible, to be accountable to some form of field structure. To remain 'independent' is to cut oneself off from the body of Christ, and that will guarantee that the missionary will not bear fruit and ultimately, will not survive."

When a missionary reaches the field, he will discover new weaknesses, new temptations and new sins. *"We learn much about ourselves when we arrive on the mission field. Some of our flaws and weaknesses may never have been revealed before in the security of our home country. But now they are. Our defects are exposed."*

Dealing With The Spiritual Roots

Amy Carmichael wrote of this inner conflict: *"One day I felt the 'I' in me rising hotly, and the Word came: 'see in it a chance to die.'"*

We can seldom change our circumstances, but we can change our reactions. How are we going to react to the circumstance – by turning towards God and letting God use the circumstance for our good, or by giving in to complaining, irritability, and a critical and bitter spirit?

Difficult circumstances are not the real problem. The real problem usually is in us. At its root, it is spiritual. Bad experiences can make us bitter or better.

On Being a Missionary exposes some of the sins that inevitably come to the surface in missions: *"Anger, irritability, rudeness, ... a judgmental attitude, resentment, jealousy, pride ... the sins of attitude ...*

*all these are root spiritual problems. They arise from pride, self-centredness or lack of faith. And until the root spiritual problem – sinful attitude – is dealt with, there can be no final correction of the person's problem ... **the success or failure of a missionary's career depends on the extent to which his attitudes are brought under the control of the Holy Spirit.**"*

Constructive Conflict

"Conflict, in and of itself, is not necessarily sinful or even harmful. In fact, conflicts usually precede any kind of human progress or development. Conflict stimulates ideas, challenges us to find new solutions, brings out the best (or worst) in us, and generally, if properly controlled, leaves us better people working in better organisations ... conflict is also inevitable."

Pride, Envy and Jealousy

Hale highlights numerous sins which lead to many missionaries failing and giving up: *"The first is the refusal to confess wrong and the second is the refusal to forgive. The first is always rooted in pride. The second is usually associated with ... slander, judgement and envy ... the third sin is self-assertiveness ... a move to get my way ... putting a higher value on our beliefs and objectives than on those of our colleagues, and for that we are prepared to sacrifice our colleague's interests in order to protect our own ... a desire to manipulate or to dominate ... self-assertiveness is more a problem in newer missionaries ... all kinds of demons are released – impatience, criticisms, hostility, frustration. Why? Because the young person wanted his own way. ... Jealousy is the second greatest sin among missionaries. ... Those passed over for leadership are jealous of those appointed; those with lesser gifts in some areas are jealous of those with greater gifts; those who are not respected and sought out by the nationals, are jealous of those who are ... jealousy always creates a desire to tear the other person down, to take away his advantage. Jealousy leads, inevitably, to resentment and backbiting. This is what destroys teams."*

"The jealous person is unable to rejoice in another's success. Yet that

successful person, of whom we are jealous, may himself be a very humble person, not seeking any credit for himself, even embarrassed by recognition of any kind. His success may have been due to simple hard work and dedication, not to any desire for recognition. Among missionaries, **the most harmful form of jealousy is that directed towards someone who is being successful in ministry.** After some years of ministry, a missionary may have built great trust among the nationals ... but to the person afflicted with jealousy, ... he sees the successful missionary as someone who has sought prominence for himself and who wants to keep it at all costs. The jealous person feels that he, himself, is being kept back; he feels threatened by the other person's success. No matter that the jealous person's perceptions are thoroughly distorted. The seeds of grumbling, dissension and slander have been planted; jealousy is fertile soil for such seeds."

"In most cases, our so-called 'righteous indignation' isn't righteous at all; it is merely our own sinful anger cloaked in self-righteousness. Whenever our anger becomes personal – that is, when it arises on our personal account or is directed against another person – it becomes selfish. The only sinless anger is that which is impersonal and unselfish."

Resentment and Bitterness

"Resentment and bitterness, on the other hand, are always sins. Resentment is prolonged anger, the continued feeling of being wronged, even after the wrong has ceased. Bitterness is the savouring of a bitter or painful experience. Resentment and bitterness are often the aftermath of anger. If we handled our anger better, we would have less trouble with resentment and bitterness."

"In the New Testament, there are relatively few instances of anger that we could say were appropriate. And even with appropriate anger, Paul gives a pretty strict time limit for it – **sundown!**"

Taking Up Grievances on Behalf of Others

"How do we tell righteous anger from sinful anger? By asking this key question: 'For whose sake am I getting angry – for Gods' sake or mine?' ...

A dangerous variation of indignation ... is taking up another's grievance against a third party. Nowhere in Scripture does God authorise us to do this. Christians often feel quite justified in taking up the grievances of others. 'It's not for my sake', they say. 'It's unselfish.' And so, without a twinge of conscience, they nurture hostile feelings against people. ... The fact is that being angry with someone on someone else's account is no more righteous than being angry at someone on our own account.

"This indignation, this taking up of a grievance, is usually the outward expression of an underlying, personal animosity – though we deny it to ourselves. The less we know about the actual situation we are taking sides on, the more righteous our indignation seems to us, and the freer we feel to indulge it.

"I have often seen this visceral anger directed from one missionary to another colleague ... in each case, the one angered did not know the full truth or even half the truth. The angered person's only source was the 'injured party.' What's more, the angered person felt obligated to take the side of the injured party against the 'wrongdoer', and to talk to others about the problem – all under the cloak of righteous concern! Before you know it, yet another team is split apart ...

Search Your Own Heart

"Search your own heart for the unrighteous source that will almost always be lurking there. Are you reliving a past conflict of your own? Does the person you're angry with remind you of someone who has wronged you in the past? Or you may have a direct grievance against the person involved, but find it more convenient to ventilate it 'on behalf of someone else'. How cleverly we justify our attacks on a brother or sister! How great is our capacity for self-deception!

Poisons For The Soul

"Resentment and bitterness all missionaries know ... are poisons for the soul ... in some people, resentment and bitterness go underground and do great damage to the person's physical, emotional and spiritual health.

"Resentment or bitterness can be redirected towards God ... all too

often, ... we end up with left over, unfocused anger, directed basically against God. We blame Him for our trouble and disappointment. Second, we may redirect our resentment to innocent parties or objects ... nationals, ... employees ... children ... we find excessive anger suddenly welling up inside us against these people for relatively trivial offences."

The Critical Spirit

Harold Cook, in *Missionary Life and Work* says: "By far the most serious overt threat to missionary relationships, the greatest danger of all, is criticism of one another."

"The devil's chief method of rendering missionaries ineffective is to divide them, and his favourite means of dividing them is a critical spirit. **The critical spirit is the most destructive attitude to be found among missionaries.** ... Criticism is basically passing judgement on someone else. Critical people are self-appointed executors of God's judgement. They always see the faults and mistakes ... just like modern-day Pharisees ... without humility, without gentleness, without love ... those who criticise reveal much more about themselves than the one being criticised. It is a common thing that picking at the faults of others is an unconscious cover for much larger sins in ourselves ... **we often render judgement against others in those very areas in which we ourselves are guilty.** We project onto others our own wrong attitudes ... and our blindness is the more remarkable because that shared fault we so easily see in our brother, we fail to see in ourselves. Beware of judging another. **'For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged.'** Matthew 7:2 ... Don't deceive yourself ... those most quick to judge others are also, not surprisingly, the most sure their judgement is correct ... **Joseph was one of the first victims of mistaken judgement** in the Bible. The 'proof' of his intention towards Potiphar's wife was the cloak he left in her hands. The household servants all saw it, and I can imagine them saying: 'Proof, proof.' 'Fire, fire', but they got the location of the fire wrong and the innocent Joseph went to jail."

"When it comes to Christians judging Christians, they get it wrong more than they get it right."

Blaming Our Benefactors

An elderly man wrote a letter addressed to God, describing his desperate needs and asking God for a certain sum of money. Not knowing how to deliver the letter addressed to God, the postal clerks in that town opened the letter and were moved to raise the money among themselves. They raised 80% of the old man's request, but couldn't raise it all. Rather than wait further, the postal clerks sent the man the money they had.

A few days later another letter came addressed to God. The postal workers eagerly gathered around to see what his letter said. It read: "*Thank you, God, for sending the money. But next time, please send it to me directly, not through the post office. Those thieving postal clerks pocketed 20% of it!*"

"Many a time we have seen missionaries labour sacrificially for others, and then be totally misjudged concerning both their actions and their motives. In many cases, that which they had been desperately trying to correct and compensate for, has been the very thing they were accused of. All of us will experience abuse and slander, sooner or later, but the worst kind of all will come from fellow Christians whom we have loved and tried to help."

Criticism is Habit Forming

Some people are critical and judgemental because of an inferiority complex. Unconsciously, they try to build themselves up by tearing others down. Others may be critical because of resentment or hostility against the person. Still others may criticise out of jealousy. The trouble is that criticism is habit forming.

The West has institutionalised criticism in the media. Journalists even get awards for ruining people's lives – no matter how much of what they have 'exposed' is untrue, or is a misrepresentation of the truth.

In Nepal, they call it "*dogs biting at people's heels.*" The Apostle Paul warned: "*If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out,*

or you will be destroyed by each other."

Galatians 5:15

"Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down. As charcoal to embers and as wood to a fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife."

Proverbs 26:20-21

As John Calvin said: *"No greater injury can be inflicted upon men than to wound their reputation."*

Submit To God's Purpose

We need to try to see God's purpose behind any given conflict and to submit to God's purpose. God wants to discipline the participants in the conflict. God is at work in conflict, perfecting His servants, creating a stronger and better functioning Christian team or church. But we are so easily discouraged by our own sins and the sins of others. Some missionaries get so discouraged they just give up.

But Paul said: ***"Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me Heavenward in Christ Jesus."***

Philippians 3: 13-14

"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves."

Romans 12:10

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility, consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

Philippians 2:3-4

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the Law of Christ."

Galatians 6:2

"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

Ephesians 4:2-3

Why Do So Many Fail and Give Up?

If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me. *Luke 9:23*

When many came to Jesus saying: "I will follow You wherever You go" (Luke 9:57), Jesus appeared to discourage them by emphasising the sacrifices and self-denial necessary. "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head" (Luke 9:58). "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). "... any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:33).

One of the most frustrating aspects of missionary work is the immensity of the task, and the scarcity of the workers. As our Lord Jesus said: "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few ..." (Luke 10:2). And so many of those workers fail and give up - leaving the remaining workers with even more responsibilities and a greater burden.

The Lord Jesus declared: "**No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the Kingdom of God**" (Luke 9:62). Steadfastness and perseverance are essential for Christian service.

To the Church at Ephesus, the Lord wrote: "Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken your first love" (Revelation 2:4). The writer to the Hebrews, speaking of the life of faith, writes: "But My righteous

one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him" (Hebrews 10:38). A strong devotional life is an absolutely essential foundation for ministry.

"What can I do with you ... your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears." Hosea 6:4

Many Forsook Christ

The Gospels record many who forsook Christ:

"When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth." Matthew 19:22

"From this time, many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him." John 6:66

"Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them." Mark 14:10

"Then all the disciples deserted Him and fled." Matthew 26:56

Many Deserted Paul

In the Pastoral Epistles, which were written to instruct ministers and missionaries, the Apostle Paul wrote of those who were teaching false doctrines, devoting themselves to myths and promoting controversies rather than God's Word, and of those who had "*wandered away*" and "*turned to meaningless talk*"

(1 Timothy 1:3 - 7).

Paul wrote of those who had rejected the faith and violated their conscience, having made a shipwreck of their faith. Some had even blasphemed (1 Timothy 1:19-20).

Paul warned against appointing recent converts or those who had not first been carefully tested - lest they "*fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap*" (1 Timothy 3:7).

Paul warns of "*hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared*" (1 Timothy 4:2). And against anyone who "*teaches false doctrines ... is conceited and understands nothing ... has an unhealthy interest in controversies and arguments that result in envy, quarrelling, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of a*

corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain ... who want to get rich, fall into temptation and a trap, and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction" (1 Timothy 6:3-9).

In these Epistles, which were written to instruct missionaries and ministers, Paul warned of: "*having a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Timothy 3:5).*

In these Pastoral Epistles, Paul names the names of those who had been co-workers of his, but who had failed and given up: "*just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth - men of depraved minds, who, as far as the Faith is concerned, are rejected" (2 Timothy 3:8).*

Paul reported that: "*everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes.*" 2 Timothy 1:15

"*Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone ...*" 2 Timothy 4:10

"*Alexander, the metal worker, did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message. At my first defence, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me ...*"

2 Timothy 4: 14-16

Paul had to warn that: "*there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers ... they're ruining whole households ... for the sake of dishonest gain ... rebuke them sharply ... they claim to know God, but by their actions they deny Him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.*" Titus 1:10-16

Disloyalty and Betrayal are Normal

"*For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. **But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.**"*

2 Timothy 4:3-5

The very fact that the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to include in these Pastoral Epistles so many warnings against divisive and disloyal co-workers, false brethren and deceivers, should be sufficient warning to wake us up to this reality. When so many of the followers of Christ Himself fell away and deserted Him, how can we expect anything less? As our Lord Jesus said: *"No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also."* John 15:20

Because of the depravity of man, we should expect sinful selfishness to predominate. **Disloyalty is normal.** It is loyalty which is unusual. **Rather than flinging up our hands and asking why so many give up, we should rather fall on our knees and thank God for those few who steadfastly persevere against all odds.** Such dedication is a work of God's grace.

Church history confirms what our Lord Jesus warned about: *"Many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other."*

Matthew 24:10

"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of Me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved."

Matthew 10:21-22

This has to be the hardest part of seeking to be faithful to the Lord. We expect opposition from the enemies of the faith, but not from fellow believers, co-workers, church elders or family members.

"If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it ... but it is you, ... my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship ..."

Psalms 55:12-14

"Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me."

Psalms 41:9

The prophet Micah warned of the time when one could not even trust a neighbour, or put confidence in a friend, when *"a man's enemies are the members of his own household."*

Micah 7:5-6

Malice, Conspiracy and Murder

King Saul, who once was anointed by the Lord, later gave in to jealousy and hatred towards David and even attempted to murder him (1 Samuel 18:8; 19:1).

The treachery which Saul showed towards his faithful servant, David, was unfortunately also shown by King David, towards one of his trusted officers, Uriah, whom he conspired to have killed in battle (2 Samuel 12:9).

King David's son, Absalom, treacherously abused the trust of his father, and plotted to overthrow King David, leading to a vicious civil war (2 Samuel 15).

Even one of Jesus' handpicked disciples, Judas, who was trusted as the treasurer of The Twelve, took money from the high priests to betray our Lord Jesus into their hands (Luke 22:48; John 13:21).

Search My Heart O Lord

Looking at these Biblical examples of treachery, it is easy for us to associate these with some who may have severely disappointed us. However, it would be more constructive if we searched our own hearts before the Lord to see how steadfast and reliable we ourselves are, first to God, and then to our family and friends.

"Be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position" (2 Peter 3:17).

It is all too common for us to see and condemn the same sin in others that we are blind to in ourselves.

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24).

Everything in life is a test of character. Extreme situations expose and bring out the best, or the worst, in people. **A person's character is accurately measured by their reaction to unfairness or bad treatment.** The measure of a person's character can be seen by the size of those things which upset him.

C.H. Spurgeon said: *"The anvil, the fire and the hammer are the*

making of us."

Martin Luther declared: *"I never knew the meaning of God's Word until I came into affliction."*

Spurgeon taught: *"The Lord gets his best soldiers out of the highlands of affliction."*

What Kind of Ground Are You?

In the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:3-23), our Lord Jesus taught that there are four types of people, pictured as:

the hard ground - which does not understand or respond to God's Word;

the rocky ground - which hears the Word of God with joy, *"but since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the Word, he quickly falls away."* (Matt. 13:21);

the thorny ground - *"the man who hears the Word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful."* (Matt. 13:22);

and the good soil - *"the man who hears the Word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."* (Matt. 13:23).

Time, trouble and tribulation reveal our true character.

When trouble or tribulation comes, those with a shallow Christian commitment, will fall away. Others will endure much longer, because their roots do go down deep, but they will also ultimately fail, because they tolerate the thorns of sin, *"... as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature."* (Luke 8:14).

"the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, they hear the Word, retain it and by persevering, produce a crop." Luke 8:15

How Deeply Has God's Word Changed You?

Here, from the clear teachings of Jesus, we see why some fail and others succeed. It has to do with how deep our roots go into

God's Word, and whether we allow the thorns of "*life's worries, riches and pleasures*" to choke our spiritual life and prevent us from maturing. Are you responsive to the rebukes, corrections and instructions of God's Word? How deep do your roots go into God's Word? What thorns of sin are you tolerating that may be choking your spiritual life?

Those who succeed, our Lord Jesus tells us, are those "*with a noble and good heart, they hear the Word, retain it and by persevering produce a crop.*"

Weak doctrines are no match for powerful trials and temptations. "*Fix these Words of Mine in your hearts and minds ...*" (Deuteronomy 11:18); "*I have hidden Your Word in my heart that I might not sin against You*" (Psalm 119:11); "*Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom ...*" (Colossians 3:16); "*For I delight in Your commandments because I love them*" (Psalm 119:47); "*For the Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart*" (Hebrews 4:12).

This teaching of our Lord explains why some fall away, but why others succeed against all odds.

Pioneers Who Persevered

William Wilberforce, although afflicted with ill health, and targeted by the most vicious campaigns of sustained hatred and character assassination, by some of the most powerful people of his day, persisted and persevered until the slave trade, and then slavery itself, was abolished.

Against all odds, and although bankrupted by a colleague, afflicted with tropical diseases, an insane wife and the death of his son, **William Carey** succeeded in launching the modern missionary movement. He established a successful mission in India, despite this being illegal at the time, recovered from a devastating fire in 1812, which destroyed his print house and years

of translation work, to produce and distribute over 200 000 Bibles, New Testaments or Gospels in 36 different languages.

America's first foreign missionary, **Adoniram Judson**, despite twice enduring imprisonment, both by the French and then by the Burmese, being severely tortured for 18 months in "*Death Prison*", losing two wives and five children to disease in the field, Adoniram persevered. He completed the translation of the Bible into Burmese, and the Burmese-English Dictionary, and established 63 churches, with 100 000 baptised believers, amongst the Karen people of Burma.

Pioneer missionary, **David Livingstone**, had to bury both his wife and daughter in Africa, yet he persevered in 3 marathon missions - on foot - across the length and breadth of Africa, enduring dangers and diseases which seemed more than any human being could endure. Yet he persevered and succeeded in opening up Africa for the Gospel and dealt a deathblow to the Islamic slave trade in Central Africa.

Plainly, these pioneers were dedicated Christians, whose lives were deeply rooted in God's Word. Their character was shaped by obedience to God's Word, and so, with a noble and good heart, they persevered to produce a great harvest of righteousness.

Affliction is the structural steel of character building

By way of contrast, all too many Christians today live in comfortable homes, travel in comfortable cars to comfortable churches where they hear comfortable messages. A soft and sheltered religion, afraid to face the storms and brave the heights, will end up fat and foul in the cages of conformity. No wonder so few are able to stand in the day of trouble.

Character and Courage

General Constand Viljoen, one time head of the South African Defence Force, was confronted on SATV about the ruined lives of those psychological casualties suffering from what they called "*the*

Angola Syndrome." General Viljoen's answer was most insightful, he noted that those who evidence character in times of peace are the same people who show courage in times of war. Those who are moral failures in civilian life are the same ones who become failures in the military. It is not the military, or the war, that ruined them. The severe stresses and crisis only revealed what was already there - either strength of character or lack of character. Those who fail in war time would have failed in life anyway - the intensity of war just revealed it earlier.

Many young people are indifferent to the church today, not because it demands too much of them, but because it demands too little. There is no challenge in this soft, shallow and selfish "*bless me*" gospel.

Sacrifice and Service

From New Testament times commitment to missionary service has meant accepting a greater likelihood of experiencing hardships and suffering, and a shorter life span. Half of all the early missionaries who came to Africa in the 19th century died within the first two years. **William Borden** gave first his money and then his life in missionary service to Egypt. He was dead within four months of his arrival in the field. Inside the cover of his Bible, he had written the words: "*No reserve, no retreat, no regrets.*"

Amy Carmichael, the missionary to India who suffered great physical afflictions, being bedridden for many years, wrote this: "*But as the Master shall the servant be, and pierced are Thy feet that lead me. Can he have travelled far, who has no wound, no scar?*"

"To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps." 1 Peter 2:21

"In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." 2 Timothy 3:12

"I tell you the truth, Jesus replied, no-one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for Me and the Gospel

*will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields - **and with them, persecutions**) and in the age to come, eternal life."* Mark 10:29-30

The Curse of Selfishness

Interestingly enough, many would apparently rather die for Christ, than die to self. The biggest hindrance to the missionary task is self. Self that refuses to go. Self that refuses to sacrifice. Self that refuses to give. Self that refuses to die.

Die to Self and Live for God

The only way to bear fruit is actually to die: *"I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves Me must follow Me ..."* John 12:24-26

All of our money, all of our time and all of our lives belong to God. We are only stewards of what belongs to God. Yet all too often, we act as though the money we have been entrusted with, the time that is given us and our very lives are actually ours to do with as we wish, rather than to fulfil God's will. Too many Christians are mainly interested in what's good for them, not what is good for God and His Kingdom. But we are sent as servants. We need Christ's love and we need Christ's attitude (Philippians 2:4-5).

Those involved in the Lord's service need to learn how to wrestle and persist in prayer, how to live and work in the presence of God, how to be filled with the Holy Spirit. We need to be self-disciplined, humble, teachable, patient, adaptable and submissive to authority.

We are either those who make a plan, or those who make excuses. We either take responsibility or we pass the buck (blame). When we see a pattern of excusing our failings by saying it's somebody else's fault, or it's somebody else's job, then we must

know that the sinful self is alive and dominant and we are far from the mind of Christ.

Why do so many fail and give up? Rather than flinging up our hands and asking why so many give up, we should rather fall on our knees and thank God for those few who steadfastly persevere against all odds. Time, trouble and tribulation reveal our true character. Those with a shallow Christian commitment will fall away. Others fail because they have allowed the thorns of sin to choke their devotional life.

The question we should rather be asking is - How do some succeed and persevere? Those who succeed, our Lord Jesus tells us, are those: "*with a noble and good heart, they hear the Word, retain it and by persevering produce a crop.*"

Let us be humble and teachable, in submission to all godly authority. Fixing the Words of God in our hearts and minds, delighting in God's commands, loving His Law, letting the Word of Christ dwell in us richly, dying to self, denying self, taking up our cross daily and following in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Hope For Those Who Have Failed

Is there any hope for those who have already failed and given up? Yes, indeed. In the book of Acts we learn of John-Mark, who was related to Barnabas (Colossians 4:10) and the son of a Godly mother, Mary, in whose home the church met for prayer when Peter was imprisoned (Acts 12:12).

When Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, they brought John-Mark with them to Antioch (Acts 12:25). When Paul and Barnabas were sent off on the first great missionary journey by the Church at Antioch, John-Mark went with them.

However, early on in the trip, John-Mark gave up and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13).

When Paul and Barnabas set off on their second missionary journey, "*Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with him, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in*

Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas ..." Acts 15:36-40

Happily, however, that is not the last we hear of John-Mark. From his unpromising beginning, John-Mark came back and reconciled with Paul, proving himself in the field to become, in later years, a faithful co-worker with Paul. *"My fellow prisoner, Aristarchus, sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)"* Colossians 4:10

"Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry." 2 Timothy 4:11

From initially being a failure, who caused a sharp disagreement and division between his cousin Barnabas and the Apostle Paul, John-Mark went on to repent, to restore, to make restitution and to rebuild Paul's trust in him. So much so that Paul, in his pastoral letter to Timothy, describes Mark as *"helpful to me in my ministry."* Paul also mentions Mark as one of his co-workers in Philemon.

He also later became an important co-worker under the Apostle Peter (1 Peter 5:13), and under his authority, the author of the Gospel of Mark.

Failure does not need to be final. By God's grace, our sins can be forgiven and our weakness can be turned to strength in Him.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles us and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our Faith."

Hebrews 12:1-2

Coping with Criticism

But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good, and you endure it, this is commendable before God.

1 Peter 2:20

When we are under fire, the Lord can send relief from unexpected quarters. When my wife, Lenora, and I were feeling the effects of a particularly vicious and sustained campaign of character assassination, we were somewhat discouraged by the silence and distance of many of our friends (who we had thought would stand with us, as we had stood with them when they had gone through testing times).

At this time of discouragement, the Lord ministered to our souls at a ministers conference through a gifted Bible teacher and preacher, Dr. Joel Beeke. The Lord used his ministry to meet us at the point of our needs and to do a deep spiritual work of healing and strengthening. These are my notes of his presentation: "*Coping with Criticism in the Ministry.*"

2 Corinthians 10 deals with some of the criticisms the Apostle Paul faced in his ministry. He was accused of being "*timid*" and "*unimpressive*" and "*his speaking amounts to nothing*" (2 Cor 10:1,10).

It is surprising that there is so little good literature on the subject when everybody in the ministry has to deal with criticism. How you respond to and deal with criticism can either strengthen or weaken your ministry. There are many people who, having endured backbiting, are very bitter, negative and pessimistic about

the ministry.

1. **Consider criticism as inevitable.** One survey reported that 81% of ministers in the US have endured hostile criticism. 25% of ministers identify criticism as their greatest trial in the ministry. There is a Dutch saying "*He who stands in the front will get kicked in the rear*".
2. **Consider the motive.** Listen well. Don't jump too quickly to defend yourself. Let them pour out all the criticism before you respond. Many a critic is angry, frustrated and unfulfilled. Evaluate their motives. Is it jealousy? Animosity? Many like to find fault in others in order to justify themselves.
3. **Consider the source.** Is it a believer? An unbeliever? A member? A leader? A fringe element? A consistently hostile person? Or a mature and normally positive church member?
4. **Consider the context.** Is the timing, setting, approach helpful or not? Don't respond to any criticism in under 24 hours. Leave time to contemplate and consider. Get over the hurt. Pray and consider it calmly. Do not respond immediately or you could damage your ministry. Give your critic time to reflect. Some criticisms are not worth responding to at all. Nehemiah did not allow criticisms to distract him from the task at hand. He refused to come down from building the wall to deal with his critics.
5. **Consider yourself.** Critics are often God's gifts to keep us from self-satisfying and self-justifying destructiveness. Although our critics are seldom right, there is sometimes some percentage of truth in part of it. Our critics tend to exaggerate in order to make their point and harm us, while we tend to exaggerate in our defence. View your feelings with suspicion. Do not complain about your trial. We normally get less criticism than we deserve. Consider how much criticism Jesus received (and He is the only One who never deserved any). Where necessary we need to say: "*I was wrong. I am sorry. Please*

forgive me." Be objective.

6. **Consider the content.** You can learn a lot, even from your worst critic. We all have our blind spots, weaknesses, attitudes and failings. Changing in response to criticism can be so constructive. Do not allow yourself to become bitter, angry or self-destructive. A simple, straightforward, short answer can be helpful. Or a respectful silence may be the most appropriate. Do not feel that you need to explain. Your friends don't need it and your enemies won't believe it. Don't take every whisper seriously. Spurgeon advised a student to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to implacable critics. A brother offended is harder to win than a city. You do not have enough time to spend on all your critics. Move on, and get on with your ministry.
7. **Consider Scripture.** Some ministers are so hyper-sensitive that they cannot endure any criticism. Others are so insensitive to criticism that they have the hide of a rhinoceros. Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Ministers need strong tenderness and tender strength. And remember that all things work together for good for those who love God and who are called according to His purpose.
8. **Consider Christ.** *"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfector of our faith, Who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame..."* Hebrews 12:2

"But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good, and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth."

1 Peter 2:20-22

Christ suffered for us and left us an example. Consider the mercy of God. If our critics are in error and we are being unjustly criticised remember if they knew what you really are deep inside, then the criticisms would be far worse. Conquer pessimism - love your critics.

- 9. Consider Biblical Saints.** For example the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 10.
- 10. Consider love.** Don't crawl into a corner. Where possible go and deal with the critic personally. Be willing to forgive any injury – even when you know they have spoken behind your back to half a dozen others first. Leave others to admonish your critic to repent of his backbiting. Unforgiveness will cripple your ministry. Pray with and for your critic first. Free yourself from bitterness. Pray before anything else is said. Show that you will be open to repentance and change if necessary. Do not respond in a bitter way. You should actually pity the bitter critics. Think of what their bitterness is doing to their children. When Matthew Henry was robbed, he responded: *"I thank you God that I was not the robber!"* Keep loving and reaching out - no matter what. If you have to give criticism give it in a sandwich: First the bread of positive affirmation, then the meat of criticism, then more bread of love on top. It will also be important to help your partner or friends to cope with criticism you have to endure. Do not allow your partner to wallow in self pity. As one wise man responded to a chorus of criticism: *"Dogs bark at the moon - but the moon keeps on shining."*
- 11. Consider the fear of God.** Refuse to live timidly. Fear of criticism is even worse than criticism itself. The fear of God should inspire us more than the fear of man restrains us.
- 12. Consider eternity.** In the light of eternity all these trials and criticisms will fall away. They will appear but a light affliction endured for Jesus sake. Let all the criticism God calls us to endure lead us closer to Christ and make us homesick for heaven. Your Saviour is greater than all these criticisms and afflictions. Count it all joy!

Conserving the Dedication

Brethren, if any man be overtaken in a fault, ye who are spiritual restore such a one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.

Galatians 6:1

The trend is alarming. Pastors, missionaries and other dedicated servants of Christ are under satanic attack as never before. Some feel isolated, cut off from true friends who understand. Satan tells them they are all alone, their problem is unique "*Just quit, give up, you don't need this kind of hassle.*"

Research shows the problem to be increasing in epidemic proportions. Consider this: if Satan cannot stop a man from trusting Christ as his Saviour, he has lost that man as a candidate for hell. If that man hears God's call to preach the Gospel and follows Him into the ministry, then he becomes a liability to Satan. However if the devil can attack that man and discourage him to the point that he is distracted, or even leaves the ministry, then Satan has won a great victory. We must expose this evil strategy and conserve the dedication.

If you are minding your own business and getting on with the job of serving Christ and you are attacked, first of all stop and consider the merits of the attack. Ask yourself, "*Is the onslaught justified? Is there a 'blind side' I have not been aware of?*" Positive self-examination is healthy. When warned of the possibility of betrayal, the disciples asked Jesus, "*Lord, is it I?*" We must all be prepared to consider the possibility of evil in our own hearts, which are *deceitful and desperately wicked*.

Keep in mind that the basic meaning of Satan is "*accuser*," and this is the primary role of an antagonist. If Satan can neutralize someone who is in the Lord's work, someone who is a force for God no matter how large or small his ministry, then the enemy has won a victory. As Christians we must be on continual guard to deny the devil this opportunity. His satanic goal is to get every servant of Christ out of the fight.

As mature, *spiritual* Christians, our foremost goal should be to "*restore*" not destroy. The antagonists invariably ignore the Biblical procedure for resolving interpersonal differences as outlined in Matthew 18. But it is a gross dereliction of spiritual responsibility to fail in the process of restoration as required in Galatians 6:1, "*Brethren, if any man be overtaken in a fault, **ye who are spiritual restore** such an one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.*" The Greek word for *restore* is the same word used in Mark 1:19 where the fishermen were "*mending their nets.*" "*Restore.*" "*Mending.*" Why were the fishermen mending their nets? So they could be **used again**. This is conserving the dedication.

Jehovah God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. Our Lord Jesus Christ emphasised their implications and added some of His own, e.g. "*Do not judge,*" Matthew 7:1. Clergy Killers routinely ignore this command and in doing so fail to consider the consequences "*or you too will be judged. For in the **same** way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the **measure** you use, it will be measured to you.*" That is scary.

Another disturbing aspect of this unpleasant business is the nauseating hypocrisy of self-appointed judges, presuming to know what God alone knows, and who usurp the prerogative which He reserves solely to Himself: the right to judge. "*All have sinned...there is not one righteous, no not one*" and "*all our righteousness is as filthy rags.*"

Unfortunately today there are well-meaning Christians who whisper (or sometimes shout), "*Don't defend yourself.*" What kind of advice is that? This attitude suggests that the victim of the slander is presumed guilty, but is not permitted to prove his own innocence

- and that any guilt or wrongdoing on the part of the accuser is not to be addressed.

It is off limits to point out inconsistencies in the criticism, or even to identify the accuser, let alone infer that he may be misinformed or at fault. This means that the victim has been judged "*guilty*" and must prove his innocence with both hands tied behind him. Such a disadvantage is seen to be "*more spiritual*."

Major Ian Thomas, in his book *The Mystery of Godliness* notes: "*Having believed what you heard about a certain person, your emotional reactions toward that individual may be adversely affected and what you heard may well have been a wicked lie! Quite obviously, if your mental conclusions and your emotional attitudes are to be not only quite **sincere**, but **right**, they must derive from **truth**! Your morality may be determined by the degree to which your **will** responds to **right** mental conclusions and to **right** emotional reactions, and translates these influences into positive action. The basis therefore, of all true morality is **Truth**!*"

Many Christians, like most of Gideon's initial army, turn back at the first hint of conflict. Their attitude is: "*Don't complain about your ordeal. Never challenge your accuser.*" To them it is unsportsmanlike to expose the adversary. Such strategy anaesthetizes any effective rebuttal and denies legitimate response. Ambrose Bierce, the satirical journalist who disappeared during the Mexican Revolution of 1914, described them as, "*One who in a perilous emergency thinks with his legs.*"

The Lord says, "*Love your enemies.*" He does not say, "*Protect your enemies from any constructive evaluation of their attack*", especially if that person is doing something wrong or if his method is blatantly un-Biblical. We are not told to ignore their un-Scriptural deeds. The Apostle Paul did not shrink from pointing out how quickly the Galatians had abandoned the tenet of grace as the foundation of the Gospel. Nor did he fail to scold the Corinthians for their carnal ways. He opposed Peter "*to his face*" when he came to Antioch, "*because he was clearly in the wrong.*" Galatians 2:11

One commentator notes under Galatians 6:1 that, "*The test of the*

Gospel is grace. If the message excludes grace, or mingles law with grace as the means either of justification or sanctification, or denies the fact or guilt of sin which alone gives grace its occasion and opportunity, it is "another" gospel, and the preacher of it is under the anathema of God." There are many Christian leaders today - Deacons, Elders, Presbyters and some Pastors – who by this definition are preaching "another" gospel.

A dear friend, whom I asked to proof read this chapter, correctly observed: *"Retaliation for personal offense suffered is never called for, justified or constructive. However, Biblical principles for dealing with those who pervert justice and engage in malicious conduct obligate those who are spiritually minded to be intolerant of antagonism and to work for the restoration of those in error to God and reconciliation among the brethren."*

Failure to deal forthrightly and Biblically with the sin of an antagonist is destructive to him by encouraging the perpetuation of his sinful behaviour. It is harmful to ministry and fails to seek first the glory of God. Righteous men and women, who clearly see the sin of character assassination, are the means God uses to bring the fruit of repentance, reconciliation and restoration.

True love cares enough to confront. But this is a two-edged sword. It is often the mask that the antagonist hides behind when launching his crusade. *"I'm only interested in 'helping' him to understand his fault."* Any suggestion that it might be equally appropriate to first examine the beam in his own eye is not met with any degree of enthusiasm.

Tartuffe, a 17th Century comedy by Molière, depicts a hypocritical pretender to piety. He is with us still, but is no longer funny.

Why should we be surprised when a fellow Christian betrays us? One of Christ's own disciples did so for thirty pieces of silver. Sadly, there are friends who will turn on you for even less today. There will always be Sanballat and Tobiah present to dishearten and discourage (Nehemiah 2:19). These types are "used" by, if not

"sent" by, Satan.

We do not excuse sin, for which Jesus died, or exonerate the sinner on whom Almighty God pronounces the penalty of death. But neither do we condemn, for that is the Divine prerogative.

There is a school of thought that teaches, falsely, "*You may defend yourself as long as you don't attack your attacker.*" If Americans had used that strategy after Pearl Harbour we'd all be speaking Japanese today. This position is illogical and its weakness is apparent.

Satan is the accuser of the Brethren. His agents are frequently recruited from within the Christian church; among those who name the Name of Christ. If he chose his cadres from without from among the godless, perverted, hedonistic crowd they would be more easily recognized and more fervently opposed. Christians would circle the wagons and prepare for battle. Resistance to external assault can be unified. But when attacked from within there is a natural reluctance to resist (even with facts to refute falsehood) lest it be considered unchristian, or to aggressively fight back, lest it look like self-justification.

So instead of defending a brother unjustly attacked we abandon him to the antagonist vultures and turn our backs while he is torn to pieces. Such vile sights are not pleasant. It upsets the comfortable cocoon in which we have ensconced ourselves. How tragic that the Devil has convinced many brethren that this is the truly "*spiritual*" way. No! Satan is "*a liar from the beginning.*"

"*We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but...*" that is not to say that real flesh and blood people are not involved. Frequently they make themselves available to Satan by giving way to some inward sin: jealousy, anger or covetousness. We must stop short of saying they are not Christians. God alone is the final judge. But we can examine their fruit. Slander is the way of the coward; the compromiser with evil. Proof again that "*a man's foes are those of his own household.*" They are Christian double agents. While purporting to serve God they are in fact promoting Satan's agenda to destroy a ministry. Those who remain silent and thereby aid the Clergy Killers by not unmasking

them are the apocalyptic accomplices. There is no other conclusion. Check the fruit (Galatians 5: 19-23).

One of the great hindrances to a quick resolution of this kind of internecine conflict is the unreasonable objection to rebuttal. It freezes the victim into inactivity and drives them to despair. Some are convinced, "*No one will believe me.*" Others are of the opinion that it's unchristian to respond. Somehow self-defense is regarded as unspiritual. It's the same logic that tries to persuade us that the woman raped and found strangled to death by her own clothing is somehow more virtuous than the lady explaining to the police officer how her attacker wound up with a fatal gunshot wound.

The communists did the same thing. They told Christian prisoners when they were released from the Gulags not to bother telling people about the horrors of their experience. "*No one will believe you.*" While it is true that many American Christians could not give credence to Richard Wurmbrand's testimony, I can assure you that he only told half the story.

R. C. Sproul reminds us, "*As fallen creatures we sin, we err and we are inherently out of shape with respect to righteousness. When we sin, we need to be reproved. When we err, we need to be corrected. When we are out of shape, we need to go into training.*" How true! But does this only apply to the accused? Does not the accuser need to be measured by the same standard?

Why should the accuser of the brethren be ineligible for questioning? Why should he not be called to give an account of his accusations and slander? "*The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him.*" Proverbs 18:17

How wise and constantly appropriate are the words of our Lord Jesus, "*The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.*" The Prophet Joel said, "*Put in the sickle; for the harvest is ripe.*" How tragic when some of the workers put the sickle into other workers, instead of the harvest. God, help us!

Bitterness or Forgiveness?

*See to it that no one misses the grace of God
and that no bitter root grows up to cause
trouble and defile many.* Hebrews 12:15

The fact that you cannot normally see roots does not mean that they are not there. Roots drink in moisture and nourishment - and they spread. Because a root is something that is underground it cannot normally be seen. But sometimes you can see visible evidence of their presence - such as when they start to lift up driveways and pavements.

The Bible warns us lest any root of bitterness spring up causing trouble and defiling many people. If there is a root of bitterness it will bear bitter fruit.

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

Ephesians 4:31–5:2

Character assassins almost always have a problem with bitterness. However, there is not much you can do about their attitudes and relationship to God. What we need to guard against is reacting to their malicious campaigns in bitterness. There is a real danger that we will become infected with bitterness ourselves.

Real or Imagined

When we sin we feel guilt. When others sin against us, we feel bitter. Bitterness is always based upon someone else's actions. These actions could be real or imagined, they may even be based on a false report, but the bitterness is always very real. Bitter people cannot imagine the possibility that they are bitter over imaginary sins. As far as the bitter person is concerned the other person's guilt must always be real.

Family and Friends

The bitterness is not necessarily concerned with how big the sin is, whether real or imagined. It more depends upon how close our relationship is with the one responsible. Strangers can do incredibly evil things all over the world, without us feeling any bitterness at all. However, our co-workers, family members, friends and immediate superiors are all close enough to us that what they do, or even what they don't do, can be perceived as such an offence that we react in bitterness. It is not how serious the offence is. It may be rather trivial. The relationship just has to be close.

Those closest to us are the ones who can hurt us the most. A husband, wife, parent, friend, brother or sister are the ones we are most sensitive towards.

Bitterness Against God

In the Bible, in the book of Ruth, we read of **Naomi** who moved from Israel to another land, where her husband and both sons died. The Bible records that Naomi reacted with bitterness towards God. *"...It grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me...Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?"*

Ruth 1:13,20-21

The Bible also tells us about the prophet **Jonah** who reacted with bitterness when the people of Nineveh repented and the Lord relented from sending judgement upon them. *"But God said to Jonah, 'Do you have the right to be angry...?' 'I do', he said. 'I am angry enough to die.'" Jonah 4:9*

Dealing With the Disease

When we are offended, we tend to react in one of two destructive ways: One way is to nurse the bitterness, to keep remembering the details until we make ourselves sick. The other way is to talk about it to as many other people as possible, spreading the bitterness and sickness widely.

However, God's Word commands us to dig up the root of bitterness and to get rid of it. **Forgive.** Jesus taught us to pray: *"Forgive our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors."* Matthew 6:12

"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." Matthew 6:14-15

Peter came to Jesus and asked: *"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, 'I tell you not seven times, but seventy times seven."*

Matthew 18:21-22

The Unforgiving Servant

The Lord told the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant: There was a servant who owed such a fortune to the king, that being unable to pay, he, his wife and his children and all that he owned was to be sold into slavery to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before the king and pleaded *"Be patient with me and I will pay back everything."* The king took pity on him, cancelled the debt – and let him go free. The Bible then relates: *"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him 'Be patient with me and I will pay you back'. But he refused. Instead*

he had the man thrown into prison. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told the master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant' he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' His master turned him over to the jailers until he could pay back all he owed. **This is how My heavenly Father shall treat each one of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.**" Matthew 18:28-35

Unconditional Unilateral Forgiveness

Not only does the Bible teach us to forgive those who ask us for forgiveness, we are also commanded to forgive others even when they don't ask for forgiveness.

*"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. **Forgive as the Lord forgave you.**"*

Colossians 3:12-13

We are to forgive unconditionally. When we are forgiven by God, we are commanded to live a life of unconditional forgiveness towards others. The fact that the offending person may not have apologised, repented or undertaken due restitution does not relieve me of my responsibility before God to forgive those who sin against me.

"But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from heaven, but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is...full of mercy..."

James 3:14-17

No matter what the offence, no matter who the offending party, we are commanded by our Sovereign Lord to forgive. To live a life of forgiveness. To "*forgive your brother from your heart*". Freely

you have received, freely give. For if you forgive men when they sin against you your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. If I refuse to forgive others, I have good reason to doubt my salvation.

The Example of Christ

Our Lord Jesus gave us the greatest example of forgiveness when on the cross, having been wrongly tried, falsely accused, unjustly condemned, whipped and beaten, with all His disciples forsaking Him, with the religious leaders condemning Him, the crowds mocking, reviling and cursing Him, our Lord Jesus prayed: "*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.*" Luke 24:34

Nothing is so Christ-like as to forgive our enemies – to forgive those who have done us great harm. Our Lord Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount: "*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*" Matthew 5:11-12

This is the Lord's command and this is His example: "*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps.*" 1 Peter 2:21

Forgiving Our Enemies

There is no more powerful a witness than when a Christian forgives an enemy. "*Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer... bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse... do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right... If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay', says the Lord. On the contrary: if your enemy is hungry, feed him, if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.***" Romans 12:12-21

Bitterness or Obedience?

The question is not whether the one offending us deserves to be forgiven. We certainly do not deserve God's forgiveness. The question is if we are going to live in obedience to God's Word or in blatant rebellion by harbouring our bitterness, unforgiveness and resentment.

The fact is: **if we refuse to forgive the root of bitterness will continue to grow within us, poisoning every aspect of our lives.** We will become sick – spiritually, emotionally, mentally and even physically sick. Bitterness is a poison and it eats up those who carry it within them.

But you may say, "*I'm not bitter. I'm just hurt.*" Well, the symptoms of feeling hurt are extremely close to the symptoms of resentment. There is a close relationship between feeling hurt, being resentful and being bitter.

Even more seriously bitterness easily turns into hatred. "*We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.*"

1 John 3:14-15

How do I know if I am bitter? **Bitterness remembers details.** As any teacher will tell you, memory is helped by reviewing, reviewing and more reviewing. When we can remember every syllable, intonation and inflection of the offence, then we must know that we have not forgiven our brother from our hearts, but we have been nursing a root of bitterness. And that is a great sin.

Better or Bitter?

Those who hope that time will heal this will be sorely disappointed. Instead of fading over the years, the bitterness tends to accumulate, deepen and fester. Instead of getting better over the years, they just get more bitter.

Nor does an apology, or even restitution by the other person,

necessarily end the bitterness. There have been many situations where the other party has done everything that could possibly be done to apologise and make right, but the offended party has continued to harbour a deadly bitterness.

Healing Through Repentance and Forgiveness

The only solution to bitterness is for the one who is bitter to confess and repent before God the sin of bitterness and unforgiveness.

"The ruthless will vanish, the mockers will disappear, and all who have an eye for evil will be cut down – those who with a word make a man out to be guilty, who ensnare the defender in court and with false testimony deprive the innocent of justice."

Isaiah 29:20

"Do not hate your brother in your heart."

Leviticus 19:17

"Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness."

1 John 2:9

"Hatred stirs up dissension, but love covers over all wrongs."

Proverbs 10:12

"This is the message we've heard from Him and declare to you: God is light; in Him there is no darkness. If we claim to have fellowship with Him, yet we walk in the darkness we lie and do not live by the truth, but if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

1 John 1:5-9

"You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You."

Isaiah 26:3

Dedication and Courage

*A curse on him who is lax in doing the Lord's work!
A curse on him who keeps his sword from bloodshed!
Jeremiah 48:10*

There is a danger that those under attack will allow themselves to be distracted from focusing on their ministry responsibilities and fulfilling the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is also the danger that we will fail to fulfil our duty and succumb to shellshock instead of joining the battle as obedient and effective soldiers of Christ.

The Birkenhead

On 14 July 1852, one of the worst naval disasters occurred off the coast of South Africa. Her Majesty's Ship **Birkenhead** struck a rockshelf and began to sink rapidly. The Birkenhead was carrying the 78th Highlanders Regiment. These were Scottish warriors who had distinguished themselves in every conflict from the Napoleonic Wars to the Crimea. Also on board with these troops were their wives and children.

It became apparent that the foundering ship was going to sink. There were very few lifeboats aboard. Nevertheless, calm prevailed.

Orders were given to place all the women and children into the few precious lifeboats. There was just enough room for the women and children. The men lined up in perfect military

formation on the deck as their pipe band played. Singing Christian hymns these Scottish stalwarts went down with the Birkenhead into the shark infested waters of the South Atlantic. No man attempted to swim to the heavily laden lifeboats, as they realised that any attempt to do so could destabilise and swamp these boats and risk the lives of the women and children.

The Birkenhead sank within 20 minutes. Not one woman or child was lost. Not one man was saved.

The soldiers and sailors of the Birkenhead exercised Christian chivalry - that in times of crisis men must give their lives that women and children may live. The discipline and self-sacrificing courage of the men of the Birkenhead inspired poet Rudyard Kipling to write: *"So they stood and was still to the Birkenhead drill; soldier and sailor too."* The phrase *"Birkenhead drill"* came to be synonymous with courage, discipline and self-sacrificing chivalry.

God Deserves Our Very Best

Perhaps you have felt that you're on a sinking ministry torpedoed by antagonists, and the sharks are circling. As Christians, we are called to wholehearted, sacrificial service. *"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as though you were working for the Lord and not for men."* Colossians 3:23

The greatest Commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength (Mark 12:30). It follows then that the greatest sin would be to fail to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, with all of our soul, with all of our mind and with all of our strength.

"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for You created all things, and by Your will they were created and have their being."

Revelation 4:11

"And they sang a new song: You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because You were slain, and with Your blood You purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they

will reign on the earth...Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea and all that is in them, singing: To Him Who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power for ever and ever!" Revelation 5:9-13

Our great God, loving Creator and merciful Redeemer deserves all our praise and honour and faithfulness and zeal and dedication. It is a terrible sin to be lax in doing the Lord's work.

Slackness in God's Service is a Sin

"Woe to you who are complacent in Zion..." Amos 6:1

2 Chronicles 24:5 reports that *"the Levites did not act at once";* Nehemiah 3:5 records: *"...but their nobles would not put their shoulders into the work..."*

"That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows."

Luke 12:47

"Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins."

James 4:17

King Saul's Partial Obedience was Actually Rebellion

Israel's first king, Saul, knew what God had commanded, but failed to fulfil his Divine instructions.

"This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'I will punish the Amalekites...now go attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them..!'"

1 Samuel 15:2-3

The Scripture records: *"but Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle...everything that was good. These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed. Then the Word of the Lord came to Samuel: 'I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from Me and has not carried out My instructions.' Samuel was troubled, and he cried out to the Lord all that night."*

1 Samuel 5:9-11

When the prophet Samuel went to meet king Saul he was told "Saul has gone to Carmel. There he has set up a monument in his own honour..." 1 Samuel 15:12

"When Samuel reached him, Saul said, 'The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord's instructions'. But Samuel said, **'What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?'** Saul answered, 'The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the Lord your God, but we totally destroyed the rest.' 'Stop!' Samuel said to Saul. 'Let me tell you what the Lord said to me last night.' 'Tell me', Saul replied. Samuel said, 'Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king of Israel. And He sent you on a mission, saying, 'go and completely destroy these wicked people, the Amalekites; make war on them until you have wiped them out.' **Why did you not obey the Lord? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the Lord?... Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry.** Because you have rejected the Word of the Lord He has rejected you as king... You have rejected the Word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel!... The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbours - to one better than you."

1 Samuel 15:14-28

Although King Saul thought his partial obedience good enough, the Lord utterly rejected him. God's Word describes King Saul's partial obedience as: "rebellion...arrogance...idolatry."

The Wickedness of the Sons of Eli and the Weakness of Eli

The book of 1 Samuel also records another example of the Lord judging those who were lax in doing His work.

"Eli's sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the Lord... This sin of the young men was very great in the Lord's sight, for they were treating

the Lord's offering with contempt."

1 Samuel 2:12,17

The sons of Eli were priests, yet they were guilty of gross immorality and theft - even in the Tabernacle.

*"Now Eli, who was very old, heard about everything his sons were doing in all of Israel and how they slept with the women who served at the entrance to the Tent of meeting. So he said to them, 'Why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours. No, my sons; it is not a good report that I hear spreading among the Lord's people. If a man sins against another man, God may mediate for him; but if a man sins against the Lord, who will intercede for him?' **His sons however did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the Lord's will to put them to death.**"*

1 Samuel 2:22-25

The Lord sent a man of God to warn Eli: *"Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribed for My dwelling? **Why do you honour your sons more than Me...** those who honour Me I will honour, but those who despise Me, will be disdained. The time is coming when I will cut short your strength and the strength of your father's house, so that there will not be an old man in your family line ... all your descendants will die in the prime of life."*

1 Samuel 2:27-32

The Lord also spoke to the young boy Samuel and gave him a message for Eli. *"And the Lord said to Samuel: 'See, I'm about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle. At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family - from beginning to end. For I told him that I would judge his family forever **because of the sin he knew about; his sons made themselves contemptible, and he failed to restrain them.**"*

1 Samuel 3:11-13

"A curse on him who is lax in doing the Lord's work! A curse on him who keeps his sword from bloodshed!"

"So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him."

Luke 17:3

"Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them."

Ephesians 5:11

Wholehearted Obedience to the Lord is Essential

"Be sure to finish the task you were given in the Lord's service."

Colossians 4:17

"My deep desire and hope is that I shall never fail in my duty, but at all times, and especially just now, I shall be full of courage so that with my whole being I shall bring honour to Christ whether I live or die."

Philippians 1:20

"But I consider my own life to be worth nothing to me; I only want to complete my mission and finish the work that the Lord Jesus gave me to do, which is to declare the Good News about the grace of God." Acts 20:24

Where God guides, He provides. **The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you.**

As General Stonewall Jackson often said: ***"Duty is ours. The consequences are God's."***

It is spiritually refreshing to step out in faith. The most healthy habit you can cultivate is the habit of practising responding to the Word of God in obedience.

"Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ...stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the Gospel."

Philippians 1:27

The men of HMS Birkenhead certainly conducted themselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ. They stood firm on a sinking ship. They did not break ranks, they did not attempt to swim to the boatloads of women and children - so as not to endanger the women and children in the fully laden life boats from being swamped or destabilised. Even as they could see the sharks circling around the sinking ship, the men stood firm. They did their duty.

"Greater love has no-one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends."

John 15:13

The Curse of Compromise and Cowardice

But the call to dedicated service is only the first part of this verse. Jeremiah 48:10 has two parts: *"A curse on him who is lax in*

doing the Lord's work! A curse on him who keeps his sword from bloodshed!"

In Revelation 2:12-17 we read in the letter to the Church in Pergamum that the Lord rebuked the believers for tolerating the idolatry and immorality of the Nicolaitans. *"Repent therefore! Otherwise I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth."* Revelation 2:16

Warfare calls for sacrifice, conscription, rationing, dedication, determination, courage and tenacity. In warfare one is required to fight. To attack the enemy. To apply all the force that is necessary in order to defeat the enemy and defend one's homeland.

"Shall your countrymen go to war while you sit here?" Numbers 32:6

"Curse Merzoz", said the angel of the Lord. 'Curse its people bitterly, because they did not come to help the Lord, to help the Lord against the mighty.'" Judges 5:23

Whose Side are You On?

"Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, 'Are you for us or for our enemies?' 'Neither' He replied, 'but as Commander of the Army of the Lord I have now come.' Then Joshua fell face down to the ground in reverence and asked Him 'What message does the Lord have for His servant?'" Joshua 5:13-14

The Lord does not come to bless our plans but to give us His orders. The question is not *"Is God on our side?"* But ***"Are we on God's side?"***

"Whoever is for the Lord, come to me." Exodus 32:26

"Choose for yourselves this day whom you shall serve." Joshua 24:15

Who is on the Lord's Side?

"Who will rise up for Me against the wicked? Who will take a stand for Me against evil doers?" Psalm 94:16

The Sword is a Symbol of Our Faith

The sword is also a symbol of our faith. During the crusades, the Knights of Saint John initiated the members of their military order with these words: *"Take this sword - its brightness stands for faith, its point for hope, its handle for charity."*

When I visited Zurich, in Switzerland, I had the privilege of visiting the church where Reformer Ulrich Zwingli ministered. Outside the church is a statue of Zwingli holding a large Bible and an even larger sword. As Ulrich Zwingli lay dying on the battlefield, attempting to defend the religious freedoms of Zurich, he declared: ***"They may kill the body, but they cannot kill the soul."***

On that same ministry trip, I was asked by a minister in Switzerland why it is that our mission, Frontline Fellowship, has a sword in its badge. I replied *"For the very same reason that Ulrich Zwingli's statue out there has a sword."*

Christianity is not a pacifist religion. A Christian, by definition, must be active. With his sleeves rolled up, being willing to get his hands dirty protecting the innocent, defending the defenceless and saving lives from unprovoked aggression. Christian love is not mere words and sentiment. **True love shows itself in action** (1 John 3:18).

If all the people with a conscience refuse to fight, then it will leave the battlefields in the hands of men without a conscience. Those who want peace must prepare for war. We must learn to be courageous, to be loyal, to be sacrificial and unselfish. We need to suppress selfish fears and desires, and choose to do our duty, to protect the innocent and to defend the defenceless. The Christian dare not choose the easy way out.

In the words immortalised by General Douglas MacArthur's great speech at West Point: ***"Duty! Honour! Country!"***

Christian Courage

I think of men like King Alfred the Great, Oliver Cromwell,

General Robert E Lee, General Stonewall Jackson, General Charles Gordon, General Christiaan De Wet, Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, General Douglas MacArthur, and General George Patton. These men epitomise duty and honour on the battlefield.

When I read this verse, I also think of the brave men of the **Shangani Patrol** in the country where I was brought up, Rhodesia. In 1893 a small reconnaissance patrol under the command of Major Alan Wilson was cut off by the flooded Shangani River and encircled by thousands of Matabele warriors. Major Wilson's men fought to the last man, selling their lives dearly. After the battle, the Matabele warriors came to Bulawayo and surrendered.

They reported that Alan Wilson's patrol had died singing their national anthem and praying the Lord's prayer together. *"The white men sang,"* they said. *"If these young men could fight like lions, what will happen when their fathers come for revenge! We want to make peace."*

I think of the courageous Christians in **the Nuba Mountains** of Sudan. An Island of Christianity in a sea of Islam. These beleaguered brethren have been enduring some of the worst persecution in the world today. Most of their villages had been burned down, most of their crops have been destroyed, most of their livestock has been looted by the National Islamic Front government. Even wells have been poisoned. Children have been kidnapped by Arab slave traders, separated from their parents, and brought up in *khalwas* where they are forcibly Islamised and Arabised. Many have been enslaved. Hundreds of Christian men have been crucified. Almost all their churches have been burned to the ground. Yet the resilient Nubans continue to stand firm and to fight ferociously for faith and freedom.

In the words of Nehemiah: *"Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, Who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes."* Nehemiah 4:14

Fight the Good Fight of Faith

Warfare is fought on many levels. Jesus said *"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth, I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."* Matthew 10:34

"For the Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joint and marrow, it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." Hebrews 4:12

The Bible is *"the sword of the spirit which is the Word of God"* Ephesians 6:17. A curse on him who keeps his sword from bloodshed.

The Scripture commands us ***"Fight the good fight of faith..."***
 1 Timothy 6:12. *"The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have Divine power to demolish strongholds."*
 2 Corinthians 10:4

We read in the book of Revelation 12:11 that *"they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the Word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death."*

The Bible makes it clear that the Christian life is real, serious warfare. Weapons are issued (2 Corinthians 10:4); strategies are formulated (Luke 14:26-33); infiltration and sabotage by the enemy is exposed (Acts 20:29-30); commissions are given (Matthew 28:19-20); battle cries are sounded (Ezekiel 33:3-9); opponents are disarmed (Colossians 2:15); captives are taken (2 Corinthians 10:5); prisoners are freed (Isaiah 51:14); and victories are won. ***"But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."*** 1 Corinthians 15:57

You Cannot Win Victories by Avoiding Battles

We cannot have victory without a battle. The only reason why the devil is so often winning is that the church is so seldom fighting.

Not only has Satan enslaved millions to false religions, sinful habits and addictions, but he is also waging an all out war against the forces of Jesus Christ. Satan aims to undermine the Church

and frustrate the Divinely appointed rescue mission entrusted to it. Satan has lured many into the ambush of pride and thousands have triggered the landmines of lust. Others have been discouraged by the bombardment of criticism and many have retreated before the poison gas of gossip. The booby traps of bitterness have crippled the critical and those who have straggled behind their units have found themselves captured by the diversions of the world. Propaganda has led some to surrender to the army of unbelief.

Soldiers of Christ

We are in a spiritual world war (Ephesians 6:12), and the fight is to preach the Gospel to the millions living under communist oppression and Islamic deception, to smuggle Bibles to those Christians living under severe persecution, to rescue those millions living under the satanic deceptions of false religious cults and sects, to free the drug addicts and liberate the alcoholics. The world is enemy occupied territory and it needs to be liberated for Christ.

Our primary targets must include the seemingly impenetrable Marxist and Muslim areas. These strongholds must be reached for Christ, no matter what the cost! The whole church needs to be involved in this war of liberation to free the whole world from the tyranny and oppression of sin and Satan and his cohorts.

As Christians we are to be soldiers of Christ. ***“Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs - he wants to please his commanding officer.”***
2 Timothy 2:3-4

We have a spiritual enemy to fight. *“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”*
Ephesians 6:12

We have a spiritual war to win (Romans 13:12-14). We have spiritual weapons that are powerful to the destroying of strongholds, to destroying false arguments and to pulling down

every proud obstacle which is raised against the knowledge of God (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

"I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me."

Philippians 4:13

"If God is for us who can be against us?"

Romans 8:31

*"In all these things we are **more than conquerors** through Him who loved us."*

Romans 8:37

Greater is Him who is in me than he that is in the world (1 John 4:4).

The Danger of Inactivity

King David was an extraordinary soldier and a devoted servant of the Lord God. David was Israel's greatest king and the author of many of the most loved Psalms and Hymns. David has the unique privilege of being described by God as *"a man after My own heart"*

Acts 13:22.

Yet 2 Samuel 11 records the most disastrous fall into sin by David. It all began with these ominous words: *"In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war... David remained in Jerusalem"*

2 Samuel 11:1

The quickest way to destroy one's spiritual zeal is to respond to Biblical commands with apathy and inactivity. It is a guaranteed pathway to spiritual disaster:

- When God speaks and we don't listen;
- What the Bible teaches, we don't apply;
- What God commands, we don't obey;
- Where God sends, we don't go.

There is a tremendous danger in passivity - inactivity is deadly to spiritual life (Matthew 25:33-46).

"Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it sins."

James 4:7

Of course, on the opposite extreme, battle fatigue / burnout is another serious threat to healthy, balanced discipleship. Nevertheless, those who linger inactively at home when they

should be off to war, are easy targets for temptation. The devil finds evil work for idle hands.

When Duty Calls

When God commissions us to fight - then we dare not flinch from our duty. We as Christians have the obligation to love our neighbours and this love must be shown in action. When Christian brothers and sisters are suffering persecution in China, Sudan, Zimbabwe and elsewhere, we must respond in prayer and action. Publicise their plight. Alert other Christians to the crisis. Pray both privately and in public meetings for the persecuted. Mobilise pressure against the persecutors. Be generous in your support of those who are practically helping the persecuted. Encourage others to contribute whatever skills or resources they can towards helping those brothers and sisters in Christ who are suffering. And if God calls you to go personally and serve His people in Sudan, North Korea, Cuba, Angola or wherever - then be prepared to respond with wholehearted enthusiasm and dedication.

It is certainly spiritually refreshing to step out in faith and obey God. The first time I heard the Gospel, I went forward and committed my life to Christ. The first time I heard a request for volunteers, I volunteered. When Scripture Union needed workers for a holiday mission; when the Sunday school needed another teacher; when posters needed to be put up to advertise an evangelistic rally; when counsellors were needed; when I heard the first challenge to get involved in missions, I volunteered. And looking back, I'm so glad I got involved on each of these occasions.

Responding to these calls with enthusiasm were the best things I could have done. They were followed by spiritually testing times, sometimes tough times, always teaching times. They were used by the Lord to purge, purify and prepare me to be more prayerful and practical in the adventure of Christian discipleship.

Overcoming Obstacles

The first time I heard of the persecution of Christians in **Mozambique** - and read in *Operation World* that there was less than one Bible for every thousand Christians there - I started to pray for Mozambique. Soon I was preparing to smuggle Bibles into that war torn Marxist country. Before long, God had miraculously provided, guided and protected me all the way to the capital city, Maputo, and I was able to deliver the first shipment of Bibles these Christians had received since the Revolution. It is a tremendous privilege to trust and serve our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Since that first mission trip over 22 years ago, I have had the joy and privilege of crossing countless borders for Christ, delivering desperately needed Bibles and medicines to war ravaged Mozambique, Angola and Sudan. Walking across the Nuba Mountains, to deliver relief aid and show Christian films in remote areas. This is the essence of Christian love in practice. Overcoming all obstacles and discouragements, enduring whatever suffering is required, making whatever sacrifices are necessary - persisting until the task is completed.

"A curse on him who is lax in doing the Lord's work! A curse on him who keeps his sword from bloodshed!"

The Washing of the Spears

One of the most unusual compliments that I have ever received has been from a man I deeply respect, Rev. Fano Sibisi, a Zulu missionary of KwaSizabantu Mission, the President of Christians for Truth. At the first Christians for Truth conference in 1991, Fano Sibisi responded to my presentation on Saturday evening with these words: *"Peter is a real Zulu. He sticks in the spear and then licks off the blood!"*

Those who may have read *The Washing of the Spears*, and understand something of the culture and history of the warlike Zulu people will understand that this was actually a compliment.

Zulus were not considered men, and were even not allowed to marry, until they had washed their spears in blood. They had to show their courage in battle by killing the enemy. For the Zulu men at that time, it was literally a curse not to have blood on his assegai. So a real Zulu was one who did not hesitate to stick in his spear (assegai) and then showed his eagerness for battle by licking the blood off the blade.

In The Service of the King of Kings

We need Christians today who will have a vision of the Lord standing with a drawn sword - the *“Commander of the Army of the Lord”*. We need men and women who will say: *“Whatever You have commanded us we will do, and wherever You send us we will go”* Joshua 1: 16. To go where God sends us, to do what He commands us.

“But the Lord said to me 'Do not say I am too young. You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you'... declares the Lord” Jeremiah 1:7-8

“Be strong and courageous...be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the Law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you may go. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. **Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”** Joshua 1:6-9

The Disgrace of Disobedience

Yet, all too often we stay seated when we should stand up. We keep silent when we should speak out. We stand back when we should step out in faith. We remain at home when we should be going out into the highways and byways to proclaim the great news of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Magician in the Mall

Sometimes the Lord makes the stones to cry out and out of the mouths of children he ordains praise.

When my daughter, Andrea, was only five years old, she was taken to the shopping centre by my mother. There in the centre of the shopping mall a magician was holding a group of children's attention when he called out to Andrea and her grandmother walking past: *"Hey, little girl, come over here! We have magic for you!"*

My mother reported that Andrea responded immediately: *"My Lord Jesus does miracles, and that's better than your magic!"*

The magician stood speechless. (There are times when we should stick the spear in and lick the blood off).

The Seriousness of Sin

Jesus taught *"I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven and whoever welcomes a little child like this in My Name welcomes Me. **But if anyone causes any of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.** Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the fire of hell."*

Matthew 18:3-9

We are Christians. We are people with a message. A message of life and death. We are soldiers of Christ engaged in a great spiritual world war. Let us wake up to the urgency of a world going to hell and a spiritual emergency in the church. Truth is at stake as humanistic philosophies sweep through our universities, infiltrate

our seminaries and creep into our churches.

To Know God and to Make Him Known

The priority of our time is to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind. This will involve the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7).

"To honour the Lord is to hate evil." Proverbs 8:13.

"Do not let evil defeat you, instead conquer evil with good."
Romans 12 :21

"...I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!"
1 Corinthians 9:16

"For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."
Acts 4:20

"Make every effort..." Luke 13:24 *"...fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you..."* 2 Timothy 1:6

"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of self-control." 2 Timothy 1:7

Do you know what God wants you to do? Are you doing it wholeheartedly? *"When duty calls or danger - be never wanting there."*

Do you know your Bible? Are you applying it effectively to every area of life? *"A curse on him who is lax in doing the Lord's work! A curse on him who keeps his sword from bloodshed!"*

"Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain."

1 Corinthians 15:58

"Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong." 1 Corinthians 16:13

"If anyone does not love the Lord - a curse be on him."

1 Corinthians 16:22

"Praise be to the Lord my Rock, Who trains my hands for war, my fingers for battle. He is my loving God and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield, in Whom I take refuge...blessed are the people whose God is the Lord." Psalm 144:1-15

Ecclesiastical Courts and Judicial Malfeasance

*You shall do no injustice in judgement. You shall not
be partial to the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty.
In righteousness you shall judge your neighbour.*
Leviticus 19:15

Introduction – Discipline, Justice and Church Courts

As long as there are imperfect people, there will be problems. We all fall short of the glory of God and need the encouragement and help of our brothers to become what God has called us to be. Historically, Christians have always regarded "*discipline*" as one of the fundamental marks identifying a "*true*" church of the Lord Jesus. "*Discipline*" in this sense, is what the church is supposed to do when people err, have disputes, or need reproof, correction and "*training in righteousness*" (2 Tim 3:16-17).

Elders, pastors, deacons and other Christian leaders are often frustrated by the lack of consistency and knowledge about their role in church discipline and what they can do to bring individuals or their congregation through difficult periods of conflict or sin. The average person in the pew is often frustrated when sins are not confronted, or when they see some injustice occurring and "*nobody will do anything about it!*" Everyone knows that something is wrong, but nobody seems sure what to do about it.

However, the good news is that the Bible provides clear direction for handling disputes and dealing with error. While conflicts will occur and Christians will sin, by trusting God and being committed to following His principles for church discipline, schism can be avoided, sinners redeemed and relationships

properly restored.

But to achieve godly ends, we must use the appropriate means – and that of course is the real problem. Most commonly, when a problem arises we either (1) ignore it, hoping the offender will simply leave the church or (2) finally get so fed up we walk away ourselves!

But if pastors and elders take their responsibilities seriously to shepherd the people of God, they cannot let sin go unrebuked or uncorrected; however, how do they even **know** whether someone needs correcting? Who gets to decide that "*Brother So and So*" is in sin, and what is the basis of their determination? What is to keep the elders from forming their own little autocratic oligarchy, judging issues on the basis of their personal preferences and thus tyrannizing the people of God according to their own whims?

Whether we admit it or not; there is always **some** process being used to decide that a sin was committed, and what should be the "*appropriate*" response. The process might be formal or informal; the elders may have a written guideline for handling conflicts and sins, or they just might assume, "*everyone knows we do it **this** way.*" But it is inescapable that **some** way is being used to deal with problems, disputes and sins; the only issue is whether it is God's way!

Judicial process is the term that has been coined to define the Scriptural mechanism for working through our problems in a way that both honours God and benefits all those involved. 1 Corinthians 6:1ff requires Christians to resolve their differences by sitting down before some wise person and having them adjudicate the dispute. Furthermore, Matthew 18:15ff requires both individuals **and** the local church to take certain, definite steps when a man is accused of sin. These are not just good suggestions, or nice ideas, but fundamental principles that God commands us to follow when we have a problem.

Since the time of the Reformation, evangelical Presbyterians, concerned about this aspect of church life, have diligently tried to

formalize a regulated system of justly dealing with accusations of unrepentant sin as well as a means for wisely and Biblically adjudicating disputes. The Reformers had suffered terribly under the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church courts and conscientiously strove to ensure that such abuses of power would not taint the new churches. Therefore, over the centuries, they developed practical, effective and Biblical procedures that **every** believer ought to carefully consider.

It needs to be remembered, however, that church courts have an ancient and honourable lineage that far precedes the Reformation. God required Moses to establish an ascending series of courts in Israel (cf. Ex 18:21, Deut 16:18, 25:1, etc.); clearly God knew that even His own covenant people would have problems and conflicts. The issue is whether they are handled properly and in accordance with His universal, unchanging moral standards or by some arbitrary system we establish ourselves.

And lest anyone think this was just some "*Old Testament*" principle, the early Church quickly followed this same model and built their own "*court*" system. Jesus assumed in Matthew 18:15 that there would exist within His church some objective mechanism to deal with unrepentant sin. And not only does the Apostle Paul explicitly command us to establish judicial procedures in his letter to the Corinthians, but in the book of Acts, the apostles, elders and pastors met to adjudicate a theological controversy that affected the fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers (cf. Acts 15:1ff); hence Paul's comment was based on the Lord's instruction and apostolic precedent.

And in the second, third and fourth centuries, as the Roman world collapsed due to its own tyranny, Christianity made some of its greatest cultural inroads due to its Biblical judicial system. The Roman secular courts were notoriously corrupt; "*justice*" went to whoever paid the judge the highest bribe. Christian courts, initially set up as per 1 Corinthians 6:1 and Acts 15:1ff to settle disputes between believers – became the only alternative for many

pagans. They willingly brought their problems to us, because we had established a reputation for fairness, justice and wisdom. Even though they rejected our Lord and lived in squalid idolatry, they had to come to the Christian church for justice.

As a result, the church continued to gain prominence in Roman society even as the pagan culture itself was collapsing into chaos and anarchy. Eventually, when the Empire fell to barbarian invaders, the only organization left intact was the Christian church. And through her missionaries, hospitals, evangelists and courts, the church reformed pagan Europe and established the foundations for a Christian civilization.

However, today, most Christians have forgotten their judicial legacy and do not understand the Biblical mandate upon which this legacy was built. When a dispute occurs, many churches either do not want to get involved – or do not know how to adjudicate problems properly – resulting in the average person often being left frustrated, embittered and dissatisfied. Even more sadly, when churches that **do** retain some sort of judicial practice actually try a case, they often fall far short of justice because they have forgotten how a church court is supposed to operate.

Perhaps the saddest observation of all is that a man is more likely to get justice in the pagan, civil courts today than he is within the modern household of God. Paul reminded the Corinthians that one day, they would judge angels; yet today we cannot seem to resolve the simplest problem.

Thus we offer the following as an introduction to both the concept and the dangers associated with ecclesiastical judicial process. Some of these chapters were originally written as the author attempted to fulfil his covenant duties to instruct his elders on how they were to govern the congregation wisely and judiciously. Other chapters began as answers to specific questions asked by church prosecutors and defence counsels who requested our advice. We firmly believe with every fibre of our beings that when churches put these principles into practice, the church

thrives and flourishes. And we also firmly believe that failing to understand and apply these principles means a "house divided" against itself – salt that has lost its savour, and light that has grown dim.

Now truth in advertising forces us to acknowledge that the following discussions assume some form of "Presbyterian" or "representative form" of church government; i.e. that there is a group of wise and godly men who have responsibility to govern the church under God. These men, usually called "elders" are chosen because the congregation believes they have both the character (e.g. 1 Timothy 3:1ff) as well as the practical wisdom needed to make sound decisions. Such elders have both the courage and the will to take seriously their God-given duty to discipline unrepentant sin, rebuke error and resolve conflicts (cf. 1 Thess 5:14).

But let there be no mistake, 1 Corinthians 6:1ff requires **every** church to have some sort of "court" to adjudicate conflicts, reprove the wicked, warn the lapsed and resolve differences. Now, different churches may call this "court" by different names but if there is a group of leaders who make decisions which, according to the Word of God, are binding and for which they are held accountable – then this is your "court."

And every church does have **some** mechanism for dealing with sins; even if they do so by choosing to ignore it! But if a church earnestly and sincerely wants to be faithful to God and minister to the people under their care, the next question is "*How do you **know** the decisions are actually wise and in accordance with God's will?*" We need to remember that all authority within the church is derived from and provided for the express purpose of glorifying God by accomplishing His will. Therefore, the procedures we use to resolve a problem, confront a sin or rebuke another are not arbitrary but limited by the Bible. While some churches lack any formal procedures, others have implemented authoritarian practices that enable Elders to step well beyond their legitimate

authority in Scripture. In other words, to disagree with the elders on any issue at any time is considered rebellion to God! As the old Romans asked "*who will guard the guardians?*"

Neither anarchy nor tyranny in the church is Biblical; but how do you avoid either **unless** you establish well-defined criteria ahead of time that says, "*this is what we all agree that the Bible requires and we covenant together to follow these procedures when a problem arises.*" I know what you are thinking; why all this formality – isn't it just enough to say we believe the Bible? Really, so what happens when **your** understanding of the Bible differs from someone else's? Who is right, and who is wrong, and on what basis is that decision being made?

If you are still not convinced, then please take a long, hard look at the chapter on "*Critical Thinking and the Evaluation of Evidence*" and consider that question again. If you do not have a well-regulated discipline process, spelled out in (what some might call excruciating) detail, then all **those** factors will come into play – and justice will be denied.

Therefore, despite diverse views on church government, all Christians spanning the denominational spectrum will benefit from thinking through the Biblical principles for church discipline and the process they use to arrive at judgments; and for those who have never encountered this idea before, we sincerely hope that there will be prayerful consideration about how to establish some impartial, objective and Biblical judicial system in their churches for the glory of God and the peace and purity of the Church.

Thus we offer these principles as an introduction to ecclesiastical judicial process. I admit up front a bias in favour of historic, evangelical Presbyterianism, because our system has an ascending series of courts **above** the local church that can review procedures and judgments. Presbyterians, or at least those of us who hold to the historic Biblical faith, presume that all men can err. Thus, the higher courts exist as a safeguard against two kinds of evil; (1) sincere men who make bad decisions, thus oppressing or

denying justice to the innocent or allowing the guilty to go free; and (2) wicked men who deliberately pervert the process for their own selfish ends.

But all churches need some sort of system where both the accused and the accuser know their rights and responsibilities, where there is some sort of a check on both ecclesiastical tyrants and terrorists. If a church believes that it must remain independent to be faithful to God, then let it covenant with other churches with whom it shares a common theology and practice, so that when a problem comes up that cannot be resolved at the local level, they will voluntarily work together with like-minded brothers from other churches to find a solution.

Now no book can address every aspect of its subject matter; and this is really not a book about church discipline so much as about Christians being victimized because the procedures used in determining their guilt were flawed or unbiblical. In the proper discipline of an erring brother, the "*court*" itself should be a minor part of the entire effort of winning him back from sin; i.e., meeting with him in prayer, teaching him, rebuke, etc. are all necessary and fundamental. The court becomes a cold and shallow representative of God when, in the name of "*procedures*," it divorces itself from the grace of the redeeming power of the Gospel. All proper Biblical discipline has as its most basic presupposition the goal of reclaiming a man from his sin. Yet, though this is a tremendously important topic, and **needs** a book written about it, this was not our main goal for **this** one. Here, we are exploring how men's reputations are ruined by gossips, slanderers and back-biters (ecclesiastical terrorists) or by bad decisions handed down by unjust judicial procedures (ecclesiastical tyrants).

Finally, we admit up front that the first essay is a dark and cynical piece of work. It is based on personal experience of men who have been denied justice and had their reputations destroyed because the church court either did not understand its duties, or did not know how to reach a proper verdict. If the essay is dark,

then the deeds are darker, for there can be few things more horrible than a perversion of justice. We expect our policemen to protect us, not rob us. We expect our civil courts to punish the guilty, not tyrannize the innocent. And we expect that our church courts, being committed to the glory of God and the truth of His Word will apply that Word wisely and carefully when someone is accused of sin. When the civil magistrate fails in his covenant duties to protect the citizens we have political tyranny. When the church fails in its covenant duties to resolve problems Biblically, we have apostasy.

There has got to be a better way than what we are presently doing. In God's grace, let us all pray, regardless of denominational affiliation, that He might be rich in mercy towards His people and give us justice in His church. For who knows brother, today it is someone unknown to you that is being maligned, falsely accused and his reputation destroyed by a corrupt church court. But what happens next week when you offend someone, when someone gossips or slanders you behind your back? **What are you going to do when they come for YOU?**

Stephen and Corrupt Courts

In the book of Acts, several important ecclesiastical trials are recorded where Christians ran afoul of the established Jewish church courts. In each case, malicious accusations were made, witnesses gave false testimony, and sanctions were imposed on the accused by the court (either by admonition, beatings or even unlawful execution). Each of these examples of judicial malfeasance gives insight as to why contemporary church courts so often fall short of even secular standards of justice. By examining what they did wrong, it may help us ensure that we do not replicate their mistakes.

The case of Stephen in Acts chapters six and seven is particularly illuminating. Having just been ordained to (by what most commentators believe to be) the office of deacon, Stephen

was debating the Jews before the crowds (Acts 6:8ff). His detractors were losing the debate, and therefore behind his back stirred up the crowd by accusing him of blasphemy against the temple and the Law. He was then arrested and dragged before the Sanhedrin, the supreme ecclesiastical court of the day. False witnesses, under oath, made false accusations and gave false testimony, after which he was given the opportunity to make his defence.

In chapter seven, Stephen refutes the false accusations by essentially recapitulating the entire history of Israel from Abraham through Solomon. Since he was accused of blaspheming the Law and the Temple, clearly his purpose here was to **affirm** traditional Jewish dogma; i.e. that Abraham was the father of the Israelites, the deliverance from Egypt under Moses, the giving of the Law from God, the establishment of the Kingdom under David and the holiness of the temple under Solomon. By affirming what would have been the common, accepted knowledge of Jewish history, Stephen was essentially under-cutting the false accusations being made against him. His doctrine was **not** blasphemous, did not deny “orthodoxy” and was in conformity to accepted theological standards.

Please note that Stephen's orthodoxy was in direct contrast to the theological liberals of the day, the Sadducees, who were in good standing with the ecclesiastical courts. The Sadducees had adopted some aspects of Greek philosophy, denied the resurrection and had their own, peculiar slant on Jewish religion. Yet, even though their theology was heterodox, they were neither persecuted nor inhibited in preaching **their** brand of the “faith.”

Then, after making his defence, he turned the tables on his judges and accused them of being just like their ancestors who murdered the prophets, and who, despite their external allegiance to the Law, were rebellious to God. The Sanhedrin then literally, “*stopped their ears,*” dragged him outside the city and stoned him.

A Reason Why Stephen's Trial is in Scripture

Now interesting as it may be to have an account of the first martyr, why does Scripture go into such detail regarding Stephen's case? Scripture is never given simply to satisfy our idle curiosity, but to instruct and teach; Luke had a purpose in mind for giving us so much detail about all these early trials where Christians were persecuted. By the time Luke was writing Acts, Christians were being oppressed across the empire; being charged, convicted and sentenced in both ecclesiastical and civil courts. Paul was imprisoned in Rome, and Peter would be executed shortly. I would argue that one of the main purposes in giving us such detailed records of judicial malfeasance was to encourage the saints, some of whom were being oppressed by both civil and ecclesiastical courts. This was an apologetic **for** Christianity, and an indictment **against** the contemporary civil and religious judicial systems. After all, both secular and religious leaders were condemning Christians, finding them guilty of heresy and treason; which would have been a strong mark against the credibility of the Faith. The average resident of the empire would know full well that Christians were being found guilty of all sorts of "horrible" things, and therefore would rightly be concerned about getting involved with such people.

As Luke was writing Acts, Paul was in chains, arguing for his life before Caesar. He too had been falsely accused and only by requesting a different judicial venue did he manage to escape a lynch-mob. Thus the detailed accounts of Peter, James, John, and Stephen demonstrate that Paul was in good company. If religious leaders had unlawfully arrested, tortured and killed these disciples, then it ought not be surprising they were doing the same thing to Paul. Once Luke's account was distributed, Christians would have a powerful answer as to why their leaders were being arrested and executed; the justice system itself was terribly flawed.

Contemporary Instances of Judicial Malfeasance

What is concerning to the modern reader though, is that in the two thousand years since these events took place, it appears as if the church has forgotten the cost of injustice. Rather than demonstrating to the world that within the church we can adjudicate conflicts and problems wisely, justly and fairly (1 Cor 6:1ff), some ecclesiastical courts seem to have adopted the practices of Rome and Jerusalem, rather than repudiated them.

Predetermined Verdicts

These are strong accusations, so let us see if we can defend our analysis above. First, note that the Sanhedrin had already made its mind up – before Stephen's case ever came before them. They knew full well what the Christian faith was all about and had already reached a judicial decision before any accusations were made, witnesses heard or the accused had an opportunity to answer their critics. In the Gospels, the Sanhedrin had conspired to execute Jesus supposedly because they “*feared*” that he would lead a popular uprising against Rome which would bring disaster on the entire nation. However, this was a smoke-screen; the real reason they hated Jesus was because He had consistently attacked the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, the heterodoxy of the Sadducees and the perversions of worship inside of the temple itself. Regardless of their **stated** reasons for arresting Jesus, they had already decided that He had to die and so manufactured evidence to justify their already preconceived verdict.

Sadly, this is not unusual in modern church courts (at least the churches that have courts). Though various “*rules of discipline*” used by different churches lay out reasonably good procedures for handling judicial cases, often problems are dealt with “*behind the scene.*” Someone has offended someone, and rather than follow the principles of Matthew 18:15, Galatians 6:1ff or other passages, the offended does an end run around the relevant principles that would actually resolve the problem. Instead, gossip, slander and

innuendo are used to blacken the victim, sometimes before he even knows there is a problem. Deals are then made by the “*back-door*” where the victim's fate is determined well before there is any finding of fact. Sometimes, it appears as if the only cases allowed to come forward for adjudication are those where the verdict has already been determined.

For example, in some Presbyteries in the PCA, the commission charged with investigating an offence, is the same commission that prosecutes the offense and judges the offence! This is also no different from a police officer arresting a suspect, then prosecuting the person, and then sitting as judge and jury! Thus the accused is already considered guilty before a trial takes place; a trial whose very purpose should be to determine whether he is actually guilty of anything! This is “*justice*” the old Soviet way; first consider a man guilty, then hold a “*show*” trial for the outside world to “*justify*” the actions being taken.

Using the Courts for Other Agendas

The Sanhedrin **knew** that Christianity was not a political threat (at least not in the sense of instigating an armed revolt) because they had already prosecuted Jesus. The whole point of Stephen's trial therefore was **not** to find the truth, but rather to justify their hatred and destruction of Jesus and His disciples. The Apostolic Message was that Jesus was the foretold Messiah; a fulfilment of Jewish prophecy. Therefore it was a religious conclusion that could have been either accepted or rejected by the Sanhedrin and lived with, just as the Sanhedrin rejected the Sadducees' Greek interpretation of Judaism yet managed to live in peace with them.

Instead, they used the argument that Christianity would bring about a popular revolt and the subsequent destruction of Israel by the Romans as an **excuse** to execute Jesus and persecute His disciples. Therefore though their motives sounded high and lofty, in reality it was simply a means of justifying their own actions.

Ironically, forty years later, Rome did destroy Israel because of a popular uprising; God will not be mocked.

Receiving False (Unsubstantiated) Testimony

Secondly, notice that the Sanhedrin had no qualms about listening to, and accepting false testimony, even though they **knew** that the testimony was false. These men were not confused; they knew the truth. But the truth was sacrificed for a “*higher*” purpose. They were willing to use any means to destroy Jesus and stop His message in pursuit of that “*higher*” good.

However, what was that “*higher*” good? Clearly, it could not have been a fear of Roman retaliation – they knew that Jesus was not preaching revolt against Rome. They had tried repeatedly to get him to make some “*treasonous*” statement and failed. Nor was their motivation a sincere concern that Jesus was threatening Old Testament orthodoxy. He had been repeatedly questioned and had shown that His doctrine was fully consistent with the Law and the Prophets (cf. Matt 5:18ff).

The real problem was that Jesus was a direct threat to their own power and prestige; if Jesus was the Christ, then they were no longer “*top*” dogs, and therefore Jesus had to go. They saw the crowds following first Jesus and then the Disciples and the Sanhedrin was eaten up with envy. The miracles that Jesus and the Apostles did were clearly things **they** could not do, and therefore should not be done! Rather than rejoice in people being healed, instead they became angry and spiteful. Thus Jesus and the Disciples were direct threats to their own privileged positions.

Never underestimate the ability of sinful men to find lofty, high-sounding motivations to disguise their own selfish interests and concerns. Sinful men can become expert at rationalizing, finding all sorts of “*good*” reasons for doing what they are doing. Undoubtedly many of the Sanhedrin might well have been sincere. The story of Stephen ends with the Sanhedrin handing their cloaks to Saul (later Paul). Paul became a vicious

persecutor of the early church out of the “*highest*” motives. After all, had not a duly constituted court of the church judged this new faith to be blasphemy and a threat to the purity of Jewish religion? How many other men on the Sanhedrin felt the same as Paul? Surely, the whole point of Stephen's trial was to convince **some** members (like Gamaliel who had already cautioned the Sanhedrin about persecuting the church), as well as the people in general, that these Christians were blasphemous and dangerous.

Deference to Authority

This then is the third way that churches pervert justice; **the men who constitute the assembly, who have the moral responsibility to judge, are far too likely to defer to their leaders and accept things at face value, rather than go through the hard work of determining truth and error.** All men want to be accepted and approved by other men. There is a psychological term called “*conformity behaviour*” that has been repeatedly demonstrated to operate in real life as well as the laboratory; the tendency of people to adopt the beliefs, values and standards of those around them, rather than resist, **even when they KNOW that the majority is wrong!**

This dynamic was clearly operating both in the Sanhedrin as well as in the general public. Simple cross-examination ought to have demonstrated that the accusations were false, and therefore, under Mosaic Law, the witnesses were liable to the same punishment they wished to deal out to the accused. But no one asked those hard questions, no one listened to Stephen's defence that he was teaching conformity to Old Testament religion. Instead, “good” men, who had no particular agenda, **refused** to take a stand because doing so would put them at odds with the rest of the Sanhedrin. They “*feared men more than God*” and delivered their integrity and consciences over to the wickedness of their leaders. They therefore became accessories to the crime.

In the past decade of talking to various men about certain

controversial judicial cases when I asked someone **how** they found a certain man guilty of a certain sin, the response was often, “*Well ten good men found him guilty so who was I to argue with them?*” Part of this attitude is undoubtedly due to the division of labour, nobody can do everything that needs to be done. If a judicial case is given over to a commission to investigate, and they have spent months poring over documents, receiving testimony, etc., then clearly, the average presbyter might rightly assume they know more about the case than he does.

Fear and Laziness

But often, the reason is far less laudable; for some it is laziness pure and simple. Many men do not want to do the hard work of adjudicating a difficult case, and willingly allow others to do it for them. I have heard it said, at more than one presbytery meeting that “*I didn't come here to get involved in all this messy judicial stuff. I want to be encouraged, and have fellowship, not try cases.*” And so men deliver their consciences over to others, and the innocent are persecuted.

Sometimes though, men will succumb to fear, and taking a stand in public is just too “*dangerous.*” It is seldom a situation of outright threat or intimidation, just a desire to please the group and “*not make waves.*” I have witnessed personally a number of vigorous debates on the floor of various Presbyteries where some unconstitutional act or injustice was being debated. Often, too often, I was the only one to take a public stand. When the vote came usually I would lose my point; yet often by only a few votes. It seems that many people actually agreed with the point I had been making, even though they were unwilling to stand up and speak with me. After the meeting, many times some of these men would come up and thank me for speaking out on that particular issue. This happened so often that after a while I began asking them, “*Well then, why didn't you speak to that issue? If only one or two more people had taken a public stand with me, we MIGHT have won on*

this.” Usually, these men had no answer.

They may have voted with me, but they were unwilling to stand up and vocally support the position. Why was that? They were afraid; something which I can fully understand - after all, my mouth was dry, my hands were trembling and I could feel my own heart in my throat when I believed conscience demanded that I take a public stand against what the majority of my brothers wanted to do. But if I did not stand up and address the issue, I would be failing in my ordination vows. I have agonized over almost every vote I ever made at presbytery because I **knew** that God was going to hold me personally accountable some day. Sadly, over the years, in my experience, **most men value personal peace over truth.** And so they sit silently at best. At worst, they simply follow the majority and allow injustices to occur because it is too personally threatening to take a stand. Have you ever actually watched people in a public forum vote? Many will look around to see how their friends are voting before they raise their own hands!

Inflaming the Court

In Acts 7:51, Stephen “seems” to make what many today would call a serious error. If all he had to do was defend himself against false accusations, he should have stopped after his impromptu history lesson. After all, he had just proven that he was not a blasphemer, but held to the traditional Jewish understanding of the importance of Abraham, the Law, the Kingdom and the Temple. Instead, Stephen then did something that would get him charged with arrogance and convicted of contumacy in almost every modern day church court; he turned the accusations back against the court.

Many people today would undoubtedly argue that if Stephen had just “*made nice*” with the Sanhedrin, they would have let him go. Instead, he “*called them names*” (“*stiff-necked*” and “*uncircumcised in heart*”), told them that they were “*resisting the Holy Spirit*” and

doing just what their fathers had done; murdering the prophets (vs. 51).

Why would Stephen deliberately inflame the court that was deciding his fate? First, we must not second guess Stephen here; after all, he was given direct, special revelation from God, showing that his actions and manner were approved. Furthermore he was **not** insulting them. When Paul was in a similar situation many years later, he responded to an unlawful beating by calling the Pharisees “*white-washed tombs.*” When rebuked, because he said this to the High Priest, Paul immediately recants. Stephen however did **not** recant; therefore, his remarks were not insults, but rather a prophetic judgment. Calling a man who lies, a “*liar*” is not insulting, as long as the accusation is true.

Thus Stephen knew what the **real** issue was; the Sanhedrin's own blatant refusal to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah. Everything they were doing was a “*show trial*” to justify their execution of Jesus and persecution of His disciples. The Sanhedrin had already lost whatever moral authority they had by perverting justice in executing Jesus. Stephen **knew** he was not going to get justice; after all the Sanhedrin had already unlawfully beaten Peter and John without cause or trial.

Stephen simply recognized he had nothing to fear from them, and nothing to lose by speaking the truth. As a godly man, a deacon in the church, one given miraculous powers and special revelation, he simply told them the truth; a truth they refused to hear. And so they killed the messenger.

The Hypocrisy of Many Courts

His accurate assessment of their real, underlying motives and reasons made them furious, outraged, and indignant! How dare this man call the integrity of the court into question! The hypocrisy here is so blatant it leaps off the page. **Wicked men will use the forms of justice to justify themselves, but they refuse to be in submission to the standards they use against**

others. They were upset that he correctly identified their real, underlying motivations and exposed the hypocrisy of their “*court!*” This reminds one of the story told by Abraham Lincoln about the man who was convicted of murdering his parents asking for clemency because he was “*a poor orphan!*”

Consequently, they dragged Stephen outside and murdered him. This again demonstrates the complete moral and legal bankruptcy of the court. The Sanhedrin had no right to execute anyone; remember how they had to go to Pilate to secure Jesus' execution? What they did to Stephen was murder, pure and simple; a murder that not one of them ever stood trial for (at least in a human court). The Sanhedrin became a law unto themselves, breaking both God's Law and Caesar's in killing Stephen.

This too is not dissimilar to many modern church courts. When some men are confronted with some injustice or significant procedural error that would pervert justice, many will **proudly** say “Well, I am not a BCO man...” with a shrug of the shoulder. The BCO (Book of Church Order) in the PCA is the constitution of the church; the agreed on procedural rules on how they will govern Christ's people. Every teaching and ruling elder takes a solemn oath before God and his brothers to act in accordance with these rules. Yet many do not know these rules, do not understand them, cannot recognize violations of them, and speak condescendingly and even contemptuously about those who do! They thus become oath-breakers because they either ignore or suspend their own constitution whenever it becomes inconvenient or contrary to their will.

But the **only** authority such men have in the first place comes from the covenant they make when they are ordained; a covenant that requires belief in the confessional documents of the church and adherence to the procedures of the constitution. Yet, there is a recurring lack of integrity amongst Presbyterian elders in this regard; many men are ordained who flagrantly disagree with the Westminster Standards even when they publicly vow that they are

in agreement with them. It appears that sometimes the BCO is invoked only when it supports some action or decision that the Presbytery already wants to do, regardless of the actual provisions. When the BCO is inconvenient, it is simply ignored.

Hence, today, men take unlawful, unconstitutional power unto themselves, power they have no right to exercise; but they use the credibility of the church courts to justify and rationalize their actions. In effect, they are no different in moral orientation than Stephen's murderers; they ignore their own law if they get angry enough.

God's Judgment on Corrupt Courts

Finally, it should be noted that despite the fact that none of the Sanhedrin was ever tried in a civil court for killing Stephen, we must not think that they *“got away with murder.”* God's timing is different from ours, but His justice is sure. Some issues He reserves unto Himself at the Great White Throne judgment; some issues He decides to judge in time. By 70 AD, the judicial perversions of the Sanhedrin had come full circle; first they were the victims of political revolutionaries, the Zealots, who managed to assassinate even the high priest. Eventually, the city of Jerusalem was besieged by the Romans, captured, the temple destroyed and the Sanhedrin massacred. God will not be mocked.

God's judgments are always eternal, but often temporal as well. Other than outright apostasy, there can be fewer blasphemies more serious than a court of the church, charged with dispensing God's justice, perverting that justice in His name. Churches that pervert justice will be held accountable, one way or the other; the presbyter sitting silently in his seat allowing false accusations to go unchallenged because he is either too lazy to check the facts, or too fearful of speaking out, may want to consider this. God will not be mocked. Eventually, either in time or eternity, he, his church, his presbytery or his General Assembly will be judged for his actions, or lack thereof.

Persecution by Church Courts

Many godly men since apostolic times have been persecuted by ecclesiastical courts; Luther and Calvin by Rome, the Puritans by Bloody Mary Tudor's bishops, John Knox in Scotland and others. And lest we think this is just ancient history, allow me to mention just two modern examples; J. Gresham Machen was excommunicated by the Northern Presbyterian Church; he then went on to found the Orthodox Presbyterian Church; and R. J. Rushdoony who thirty years later was persecuted by some members of that same Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

In both cases, **all that had to happen for injustice and persecution to occur was for good men to sit back and do nothing.** Machen was excommunicated because the liberals and evangelicals conspired together to rid themselves of a Reformed teacher who was upsetting the church by insisting on having missionaries actually preach the gospel! For the liberals, he was a threat to their power. To the evangelicals, he was a threat to their pensions (see Gary North's *"Crossed Fingers"*). Either way, he was *"disturbing the peace and purity"* of the church. A church court then excommunicated him; said that he was in fact a gentile and unbeliever and that no Christian ought even to eat with him. Well, the Northern Presbyterian Church is today recognized as apostate, ungodly, and wicked, despite the continued witness of some evangelicals who remained within it; but even they have a hard time stomaching some of the theological and moral rubbish that comes down every year from their general assembly.

R. J. Rushdoony fell foul of the church Machen started thirty years later by having a Bible study in his home. He was a member of Northern California Presbytery, but resided in Southern California while doing research. Certain men in the Southern Californian Presbytery objected to Rushdoony having a Bible study that was not under their control. They filed charges against him. Rushdoony considered the matter, resigned from the OPC and joined another denomination deciding that fighting a long and

vicious battle that would take years to resolve was just not worth his time; he had better things to do. And so the OPC lost one of the most important theological minds of the 20th century

Case after case appears every year in Presbyterian digests that reveal the corruption, ignorance, negligence and injustice of modern ecclesiastical trials. Granted, there are those legitimate cases of adultery, immorality, pastoral misconduct, rebellion, heresy, etc. which the courts rightly adjudicate. But what is most concerning is the number of elders who do not even read through the trial documents before voting on the verdict. In the PCA, the average Presbyterian is only allowed to approve or disapprove an independent commission's findings, without ever being able to find out what really happened. **And too often the guilty go free, while the innocent are persecuted.**

Church courts that lose their integrity have also lost their moral authority. Like the Sanhedrin, when they deliberately pervert justice in order to further some other end, whether the goal is “*peace*” or “*church growth*” or something more insidious, they bring the gospel into disrepute, hinder the advancement of the Kingdom, and subject themselves to God's inevitable judgment. Orthodox Christianity has always understood proper discipline to be an essential mark of the true church. Therefore if the courts are corrupt, whether by intention or inattention, the church has lost one of its distinctive marks, and unwittingly joined forces with Satan.

Application: What Can be Done?

The fundamental issue is one of personal, Christian character; we need men of integrity, courage, honesty and loyalty. Sadly, we have lost sight of what constitutes Christian character. Any soldier can look sharp and military in the barracks; the acid test is how he handles himself under fire. Sadly, both the church militant and the army have found no sure way to distinguish between a hero and a

coward until the bullets start flying.

The modern church has largely accommodated itself to the dominant cultural values of contemporary society; personal peace and prosperity. Francis Schaeffer warned us forty years ago, but the average elder succumbed to temptation anyway. Personal peace means that elders do not want to deal with problems. **They do not want to resolve disputes or exhort or admonish those in sin** because it makes everyone feel uncomfortable, threatening one's personal peace, and clearly can have a negative effect on the church's finances. Hence often sins go unrebuked or unconfrosted, until the situation blows up in everyone's face and the church splits.

However, if an elder **does** confront sin, Biblically, gently and with the best intentions in mind, **he** can be accused of being a trouble-maker! He is disturbing the peace of the church by revealing what many want to keep safely out of sight; if we don't see it, we don't have to deal with it. This is not unlike those people who are suffering from severe physical symptoms but refuse to seek medical attention because they are afraid the doctor might diagnose them with cancer! Eventually, these sins eat away the real unity and peace of the church, not to mention ravaging peoples' souls, but the elders choose not to see the problems, because then they would have to treat them.

Furthermore, elders often refuse to deal with problems wisely and justly because that would threaten their own prosperity. Every pastor wants a large "*successful*" church; it benefits him not only professionally, but also financially. **However, if he rebukes sin and adjudicates trials, he risks offending people. If he offends enough, they will either leave his church putting both his reputation and his salary in jeopardy, or they will conspire behind his back to destroy him.** Now, clearly, no pastor wants to admit this up front; it sounds more than a little selfish to admit he has concerns about his career or paycheck; but how else can we explain the widespread refusal of elders to

confront sin? Usually, the back door is just left open and it is hoped that “*problem people*” will fade away without involving the pastor. I have known some men to brag that they have not handled a judicial case in **years!** But are the people in all those churches really so holy or is it that some other mechanism has been found for avoiding a messy trial?

We need a commitment to something other than our own personal, subjective feelings. Modern churches suffer from a depressing lack of conviction that there is absolute truth that stands above and beyond personalities. For the average Christian, including elders, **feelings are ultimately more important than objective truth.** If something makes us feel bad, then by definition, it must **be** bad. This widespread attitude, again adopted from our pagan culture, undermines effective church discipline and destroys the integrity of a church trial. Even secular courts realize that **there are two basic elements to a fair trial; facts and law;** the Judge interprets the law, and the jury determines the facts. Regardless of how a judge may “*feel*” about a particular felon, the issue is whether the facts are accurate and the law has been broken. Shrewd lawyers therefore attempt to pervert justice by appealing to the emotions of the jurors.

But we ought to do better in ecclesiastical courts. The “*law*” is the Law of God which is objective and clear. The “*facts*” ought to be fairly and justly evaluated to determine whether it can be **proved** that the accused has broken that law. But often, the feelings of the members of the court towards the accused are more important than whether they can prove he actually broke God's Law.

There was a case in the OPC a few years back where a man was excommunicated for being “*contentious.*” I was called in as outside counsel on the case. In my own opinion, as I looked at the “*facts*” and compared them with the “*law*” it seemed clear (to me anyway) that the real problem was that the accused had been upsetting people for years by pointing out things that the leadership would rather have kept hidden. Now a point could be made that the

“method” this individual used was hardly gentle and kind; certainly he could have approached the problems he saw differently. But rather than follow the steps of Matthew 18:15 and Galatians 6:1ff and work with this individual, eventually the session just got fed up with him and wanted him out of their church (and if I had been a member of that session I might have *“felt”* the same way).

The negative disposition of the court then became the primary source of his conviction. The individual in question took the case all the way to General Assembly, weeping as he gave his testimony and repenting of any and all sins. The case was returned to the session for handling. When he formally repented before the session, they insisted on *“fruits of repentance.”* They said he was not really repentant, unless he repented of appealing the case to Presbytery and General Assembly. When he responded to the effect, *“But it was my right to appeal”* they said that attitude demonstrated he was not really repentant. The excommunication was therefore maintained.

Now I am not here trying to second guess the session, and I was not present at this final meeting. There could well be other factors of which I am ignorant that might put this case in a different light. But it certainly appears as if the negative disposition of the court overruled their sense of justice. They had a *“problem child”* but rather than follow Matthew 18:15 and other relevant passages, they used the authority of the church courts to get rid of him.

Finally, there is an authoritarian mindset amongst many Christians that manifests itself in the attitude that if *“the church courts have spoken”* it is rebellion and contumacy to speak or take a stand against injustice. In the modern era of autonomy and individualism, there is an argument that can be made that sometimes, when conscience is not at stake, a man ought to submit to even unjust adjudication (cf. 1 Peter 2:18-20). However, there must be some balance point between autonomy and compliance. The Nuremburg trials held to prosecute Nazis insisted that *“simply following orders”* is not a legitimate defence for

committing criminal acts. In the same way, a court may err (in the fact the Westminster Confession insists that courts will err), but that does not mean that the average elder ought to just roll over and accept it. I have been told by moderators of Presbytery, that when Presbytery committed an immoral, unconstitutional action, I was **morally** bound to submit to the brethren and that I was contumacious if I refused, even if my conscience was violated in the process. This “*exhortation*” was clearly contrary to both the Constitution and the Westminster Confession.

There are procedures in the BCO (or OPC Form of Government) for registering a dissent or protest against the actions of a court when one believes it to have erred. Sadly, this procedure is seldom used in most presbyteries because the very action of dissenting or protesting is seen as “*rebellion*.” The simple process of standing up to sign a dissent or protest is to risk incurring the animosity of the assembly, and therefore injustice goes unrecorded, let alone unchallenged.

Hence, there is no simple solution. **Wicked men gravitate to power and will use that power in unlawful ways.** The average presbyter might well be sincere in his own mind (i.e. not intending to commit any wicked act) but be either manipulated by those in power, afraid to stand against the group, or just too lazy to think for himself. He may well be “sincere” but more influenced by his “feelings” rather than by objective principle. For all these reasons (and others) those entrusted to give justice, rebuke error, protect the innocent or convict the guilty may fall short.

Ultimately, we must all recognize there is no “perfect” justice outside of eternity. Yet at the same time, we can work to analyse how we arrive at judicial decisions, and whether we are falling into the errors detailed above. We can work to make sure we understand both the “*law*” and have an objective basis for evaluating “*facts*.” Even so, sometimes the guilty will go free, and the righteous will be wrongfully convicted. But surely there is a difference between occasional mistakes and systematic

perversions of justice? And **until we have men of conscience and integrity, grounded in the Word, committed to objective truth and willing to take a stand despite peer pressure and conformity behaviour our courts will twist justice, and inhibit the Kingdom.**

Presuppositions of Judicial Process

***The first one to plead his cause seems right, until
his neighbour comes and examines him.***

Proverbs 18:17

A popular slogan when I first came to faith in Christ was, “*Christians are not perfect, they’re forgiven.*” This was and is an important truth; every Christian falls short of the glory of God. We think things, say things and do things that are contrary to His law and commandments. And, as a result, there will always be problems caused by our sins. We will offend people, or they will offend us. It is no good saying that Christians ought to be “*better*” – the reality is that problems, conflicts and offenses will occur, whether we want them to or not. The only real issue is how we handle those problems.

Hopefully, Christian charity and grace will suffice to resolve most problems. When we sin against God or one another, the Holy Spirit convicts us, we repent, confess our sins and, when appropriate, make restitution. But sometimes our hearts are stubborn, sometimes our thinking is confused. What happens when we are accused of being in sin, but we don't think we are? And what should the church do if someone accuses a brother of sin?

The most common way to handle these issues in the average church is by gossip, slander, innuendo, or informal procedures. As we have been arguing throughout, these “*methods*” do not and can

not work. The Bible lays out specific procedures and principles that are supposed to govern how we deal with these kinds of problems; procedures that most modern Christians have simply never understood or applied.

Some churches though, such as evangelical Presbyterians have well developed Biblically based procedures in place to deal with problems, conflicts and unrepentant sin. Yet, they too often find it difficult to reach the proper balance concerning judicial procedures and simple justice. On the one hand, there are those of a legalistic bent who look for a judicial action to solve every problem. They flood the church courts with accusations, condemnations, complaints and appeals whenever they do not get their own way. So much of the church's precious, limited time is therefore spent on dealing with all of these formal complaints that little real work of the ministry seems to get done. Furthermore, decisions often tend to hang on whether technical details of the constitution have been followed; giving some people the impression that justice can be perverted to satisfy the legalistic provisions of the constitution.

On the other hand, and perhaps as a reaction to the problems above, other Presbyterians intuitively distrust any judicial process, and will do anything to get around actually trying a case in the church courts. But the problem here is that in a legitimate desire for justice, often by side-stepping the procedures, such people can inadvertently pervert justice by substituting their own standards for those of the church. **Sins can go uncorrected, heresies can flourish and men's reputations can be ruined because the courts are inexperienced in rendering wise judgments based on constitutional criteria. Gossip, tale-bearing and innuendo often replace the rules of evidence.**

There is a third way; understanding the presuppositions that govern both the Confessional Standards, and the constitution, and then acting consistently with those presuppositions. We need to remember that Van Til was correct: **there is no neutrality; men will become consistent with their basic presuppositions.**

And sadly, when we do not understand our assumptions concerning the way the Church is to handle sin, often unbiblical presuppositions can remain unchallenged for years. Actions that logically derive from these presuppositions can then influence the direction of the judicial process; and in some cases, distort or even pervert it.

Perhaps one of the more common problems is that men can be divided over certain cases, with the two sides literally at war with each other, because there may be two different sets of presuppositions working in the background. Each side may well be sincere, in that their ideas, practices and judgments derive logically and naturally from their basic presuppositions about what God requires. **But if those presuppositions are not correct, then no matter how sincere the men, their judgments will be skewed accordingly.**

In this chapter we are primarily concerned with understanding how the procedures we use in resolving a problem are developed from basic Biblical principles. For purposes of illustration, we will use the current Book of Church Order (BCO) for the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) since the PCA is the largest Reformed denomination in the United States. Though other Presbyterian churches' constitutions may differ in specific details, the general philosophy will remain the same. These judicial procedures are intended to be practical, Biblically based methods for **identifying, correcting, and rebuking sin so that sinful men might be brought to genuine repentance. At the same time, these principles are designed to protect the innocent from false accusations.** Any church wanting to institute a fair, impartial and Biblical means of adjudicating problems or disputes would not go wrong by carefully considering these principles.

The current BCO is a direct descendant of the Directory of Church Government published by the Kirk of Scotland in 1647. The BCO has been revised, edited and amended many times since 1647, but its basic presuppositions are derived from the historical

situation that faced the Puritans and Presbyterians in Scotland and England, as well as other Reformed churches in Europe. All these churches had suffered under the hand of ecclesiastical tyranny, with ministers being thrown out of their pulpits, arrested, imprisoned, banished and sometimes executed. Frequently, these convictions were straightforward perversions of justice. When the Kirk of Scotland developed the Form of Government and Rules of Discipline, they had a direct, personal interest in creating just Biblical judicial procedures so that ecclesiastical courts would not tyrannize innocent men.

As well, the Scottish Kirk had a high view of their ecclesiastical responsibility to work for the purity of the church. Unlike the Roman courts that appeared to protect heresy and moral impurity, Reformed courts were **designed both to protect the church from error and its members from sin**. Sin was to be confronted, wisely, judicially, and fairly.

Furthermore, the BCO must never be separated from the Westminster Confession (the doctrinal statement drawn up in 1647) itself. The same theological presuppositions that govern the Confession are both implicit and explicit in the BCO. For example, the Confession and BCO both assume “total depravity” or that sinful men will sin, and therefore there are specific procedures developed to handle sin. The BCO, with the Confession also realizes the limits of any human court. The Confession, in the chapter on Synods and Councils states, *“All synods or councils... may err, and many have erred.”* **Perfect justice is not to be had on this side of eternity.** Even the best assembly of godly men, sincere in their motivations, and intent on righteousness, may err. Therefore, the Confession and the BCO recognize that there are certain limits to church courts. **While the goal is always justice, some things are beyond the court's ability because of the limits of imperfect men and, therefore, must be left for God to judge.**

What Sins Can a Court Lawfully Judge?

BCO 29-1 states specifically that, "*An offense, the proper object of judicial process, is anything in the doctrines or practices of a church member professing faith in Christ which is contrary to the Word of God.*" It then goes on to detail that the Confession, and BCO, are the agreed upon standard by which a man is to be judged. Thus, note carefully, that "*offenses*" are "*doctrines or practices*" contrary to the Word of God. Church courts may rightly judge a man's actions, or his words, to see if they are in conformity to Scripture, but they cannot judge a man's heart.

The Scriptures, of course, always remain the final standard; the Moral Law of the Ten Commandments summarizes God's definition of sin. The WCF in the larger Catechism amplifies each commandment, showing both the positive and negative applications. This process itself is Biblically based, in the distinction made between *case law* and *statute law*. The Ten Commandments give us the *statute law*; the other "*case*" laws (all those specific rules and regulations that God gives in the Old Testament) show how these universal moral principles were to work out in various real-life situations.

For example, the Apostle Paul uses an Old Testament case law of "*do not muzzle the ox*" to show that pastors ought to be paid (1 Cor 9:9-10). In other words, a general principle needs a specific illustration if it is to be properly understood. Thus in the Ten Commandments we have the general principle, and then throughout the rest of Scripture we have "*real world*" examples of how these principles actually are applied in life.

The Larger Catechism of the Westminster Confession follows exactly this process when it explains the meaning of the Moral Law; the specific commandment is stated, and then both the positive and negative implications are discussed. Furthermore, in WCF 19:4, the Divines specifically mention the continuing equity of these laws to modern life. The Old Testament Scripture proofs taken directly from the Law are often used to verify specific

requirements of the Confession.

Since the Confession itself takes so much care in defining the positive and negative duties under the moral law, therefore, not all sins are easy to discern; wisdom is required to determine if something is, in fact, sin. And as mentioned above, a church court is only allowed to deal with sins that can be witnessed; i.e., “*doctrines or practices*” as opposed to “*heart sins*.” A court will have to weigh a person's particular words or actions against the Confession and the Moral Law, its exposition in the Larger Catechism and its relationship to the general equity of other Biblical principles to determine whether a violation of God's Law has occurred.

Now this is important; in order to have a fair, impartial and just court system, there has to be a universally agreed upon standard by which everything is measured. Many modern churches will say, “*We believe the Bible*” and that is great, in so far as it goes. But the real issue is, “*what do you believe the Bible teaches?*” You see, often conflicts, problems and disputes arise because two different people have two different understandings of what the Bible requires. In effect, one man wants to hold another man accountable to his own, personal, subjective understanding. The inevitable result of this presupposition is that no one will ever be able to have fellowship with anyone, because each man in effect determines what is right “*in his own eyes*.” The Reformers, however, wrote out systematic definitions of both sound doctrine and sound ethics, and then made room for “*liberty of conscience*” on those matters that they could not resolve.

Moving on, BCO 29-2 distinguishes between two types of offenses, *personal* or *general*. Such offenses are either *private* or *public*. A personal offense is a sin against a particular individual. General offenses are heresies or immoralities not particularly related to an individual. For example, a personal offense would be a man accusing someone of offending him. A general offense would be a man who stole something from work that later became public

knowledge.

Private offenses are those known only to a few; public offenses are those which are “*notorious*.” The word “*notorious*” needs to be carefully defined. Some people think it means “*especially bad*” and therefore conclude that the court may sidestep Matthew 18:15ff if the sin is particularly heinous. In fact, “*notorious*” simply means, “*widely but unfavourably known*” (Webster's New World Dictionary). Courts of the church are especially empowered and required to investigate and prosecute “*notorious*” offenses because the reputation of the entire Church is at stake, while individuals prosecute personal offenses.

Therefore, before a man can be charged with any sin, it must be demonstrated by either the words that he has spoken, or the actions that he has taken, that he has violated the Moral Law or taught contrary to the doctrinal standards of the church. He cannot be convicted in a church court of “*heart*” sins, because no human court can judge the heart (e.g., 1 Sam 16:7, Acts 1:24, Provbs 21:2, etc.). To some, this may seem to fall short of justice, because often, though we may not be able to prove that a man is in sin, we suspect (sometimes strongly) that he is using the procedures of the courts to avoid repentance. We are often also rightly concerned about the sins of the Pharisees who were “*white-washed*” tombs: clean and pretty on the outside, but full of death and corruption on the inside. It is perfectly natural then to desire the courts of the Church to deal with such sins.

However, Presbyterians have as a basic presupposition that man is “*totally depraved*,” i.e. that sin affects every single aspect of his life and nature. Therefore, they ought to expect that even the best efforts of imperfect men will also be imperfect and that perfect justice resides ultimately and finally with God Himself. They must also rightly assume that though Christ has given us procedures for restoring an erring brother, that the ministry of the Word and Sacraments, as used by the Holy Spirit, will convict godly men of sin, even “*heart*” sins. Church courts exist, not to

purify the heart (though discipline against proven sins is intended to be a tool of the Holy Spirit to facilitate just this kind of change; cf. 1 Tim 1:18ff), but rather to deal with outward manifestations of sin. The heart belongs to God and only He can judge it, convict it, and bring it to repentance.

Rules of Evidence

Before a man can be accused before a church court of any sin, there must be **evidence** (BCO 35-1ff-and see Chapter 13 on “Critical Thinking Skills and Evaluating Evidence”). Evidence is provided by one of two ways. First, evidence can be given by the testimony of more than one witness (BCO 35-3). If two or more people can testify that “*So and so said such and such, or was observed doing thusly*” and these things were violations of the Moral Law, then this constitutes evidence on which a man can be charged and convicted in a church court. But first notice that the BCO makes it clear that such testimony is not always credible (BCO 35-1) and **the court is required to determine the reliability of any witness before reaching a judgment**. Because men are imperfect they can and do give imperfect testimony. Sometimes even sincere people are confused about situations, their memories fail them, or when challenged, they cannot prove that they saw or heard what they say they did. Hence it is important to have *rules of evidence* to govern how we evaluate testimony.

Furthermore, sometimes, wicked men will seek to pervert justice and lie. Sometimes, men are so racked with anger and guilt that they intentionally distort the truth to make their case. Therefore, even though someone might testify that another person sinned, this does not necessarily make that testimony true, or require the court to accept it; hence the need for at least two witnesses.

Secondly, notice that the testimony of two or more witnesses assumes that Matthew 18:1ff has been followed. While this will be discussed in more detail below, BCO 35-1 requiring two or more

witnesses presumes that the accuser has gone to his brother and confronted him before he makes formal accusations against him to a church court. He has two witnesses just because he has already followed Matthew 18.

Since Matthew 18:15ff is already assumed **before** evidence is brought before the court, a second rule of evidence allows a witness to bring an accusation, if he can "*corroborate it with other evidence, then the offense may be considered to be proved.*" For example, if one brother accuses another of lying, and then produces a letter, email, fax or some other document that verifies the accusation, the court may consider that accusation as proven. But the operative term here is "*proven.*" Just because a court **thinks** a man may have sinned, does not mean that they can rule that he has sinned. And yes, the opposite is true as well, just because a court cannot **prove** a man sinned, does not mean that he is innocent. Guilty men go free in church courts, just as they do in secular ones, when the burden of proof is not met. However, the BCO assumes that God as the eternal judge will ultimately correct any deficiencies of both secular and ecclesiastical courts.

The BCO also allows for cross-examination by the accused. The accused always has the right to face the witnesses against him, and is given an opportunity to dispute their testimony by pointing out things the prosecutor may have missed. The accused can legitimately call the witness's testimony into question; e.g., if he can demonstrate that the witness is prejudiced against him, slanting the facts, leaving out crucial bits of evidence, etc., it may well invalidate the testimony.

The BCO makes an assumption, basic to Anglo-Saxon Law, which in turn is based on the Biblical Reformation of English judicial procedures; **a man is to be considered innocent until proven guilty.** A court exists to establish the facts. The court can only look at the facts that come before it (whether by the accusations of others or through its own investigations). It cannot

render a judgment on any other basis than those facts. A member of the court may well have a “gut-level” feeling that the accused is in sin, but unless that sin is proven, he cannot convict him of it.

That such evidence is necessary before an accusation of sin can be made is seen in BCO 31-2 where it states, *“They shall with due diligence and great discretion demand from such persons satisfactory explanations concerning reports affecting their Christian character. This duty is more imperative when those who deem themselves aggrieved by injurious reports shall ask an investigation.”* The court here first calls a person being accused to come and give an account. Before any formal accusations are made, the “accused” is given an opportunity to explain his actions. It is only after hearing that explanation and if there is a “strong presumption of guilt” that a man is tried by the court (BCO 31-2). This is not dissimilar to secular courts where an indictment is predicated upon the District Attorney demonstrating to a judge (or Grand Jury) that they have sufficient evidence against a man's presumption of innocence before he is formally charged with a crime.

The court has a responsibility for preserving the peace and purity of the church. When it becomes aware that a person may be in unrepentant sin, the court has a duty to investigate. However, the “accused” has the right to answer any questions, concerns, etc., **before** he is accused of being in sin.

The investigation consists of two basic steps; (1) does the accusation actually concern a **sin** under the Moral Law or a heresy? And (2) is there some reason to believe that the accused **may** have committed that sin?

Yet a problem immediately becomes clear when we reflect upon these two basic principles; if a trial can only go forward **if** the court believes there is a “strong presumption of guilt” there would never be a trial unless the court already believed the accused was guilty! But if the court is already convinced that a man is guilty, what evidence could ever be presented to overturn the court's already preconceived verdict?

Though nowhere stated explicitly in the BCO, simple common sense dictates that the individuals who **investigate** a charge cannot be the same ones who then **judge** the charge. If these two functions are combined, it must inevitably lead to a lack of justice. The whole point of a trial is to determine the facts; both sides are given an opportunity to state their case, call their witnesses and present evidence before an objective tribunal – which then makes a decision based on **all** the evidence. But if the same court investigates and then adjudicates, the accused may never be given an opportunity to present his side of the story until **after** the court has already determined its verdict. While we will go into this in another chapter (Critical Thinking Skills and Evaluating Evidence) it is important to note here that those who investigate an accusation and then prosecute an accusation; in the name of justice and simple logic must **never** be the same ones who judge it.

Matthew 18 and Judicial Process

Furthermore, before **any** of the above can be followed, the court must ensure that the general provisions of Matthew 18 have been followed. BCO 27-5 states that Scriptural Law is the basis of all discipline. *“Proper disciplinary procedures are set forth in Scripture and **must** [emphasis added] be followed. They are; instruction in the Word; Individual's responsibility to admonish one another; If the admonition is rejected, then the calling of one or more witnesses; If rejection persists, then the Church **must** [emphasis added] act through her court unto admonition, suspension, excommunication and deposition...”*

Thus it is clear that the BCO requires an accuser to follow Matthew 18, if he wishes to make accusations against a brother before the Church. **If an accuser comes before the court and has not followed Matthew 18, it is the court's responsibility to send that person back to the “accused” and MUST not hear his complaint until he has followed those steps.** The reason is simple; all church discipline has as its foundation the desire to bring an erring brother to repentance. **Discipline is**

about restoration and reconciliation. It is not about “getting even” with someone with whom one has a grudge. It is not about the church courts censuring someone they dislike. It is not even like the secular courts whose primary concern is lawful vengeance against criminals (cf. Rms 13:1ff). Discipline is always predicated upon the desire to restore a brother. Therefore, the well being of the accused is always of paramount concern.

Furthermore, the only authority a church court has is that which comes from the Lord Jesus through His Word. Therefore, His procedures **always** take precedence over those we might develop. The Lord Jesus requires personal confrontation **before** bringing an accusation to the church; no church court has the right or authority to act when that procedure has not been followed.

Now for those reading this who are familiar with the BCO (and for those who are not, our apologies for this tangent) it may appear that there is a bit of conflict here between BCO 27 and BCO 31 in that BCO 27 requires Christians to follow Matthew 18 before bringing accusations to the court. But BCO 31 allows the court to institute an investigation against someone after having the “*accused*” come forward and explain his actions. But how does the court ever hear about an accusation against someone if accusers are required to follow Matthew 18 before they go to a court of the church? Does BCO 31 then allow a court to listen to gossip and slander, practices which are forbidden in Scripture?

The short answer is, “*no.*” A court of the church can hear of things in lawful ways, which gives them legitimate concerns about the spiritual well being of those under their care. BCO 31 does not require anyone to make any accusations against anyone to the court. For example, a person could come to the Session and ask a question such as, “*My Sunday School teacher said in class today that you don't have to believe in the Trinity to be a Christian, is that true?*” The person asking the question is not making a slanderous accusation here, but bringing a question to the court. The court then, on its own authority can investigate this statement by

calling the teacher in and asking what he said, and what the context was. What the court may **not** do, based on this one report, is decide that the Sunday school teacher in question is a heretic and must be censured and removed.

Thus, the court might hear of things in such ways that would not be considered slander or tale-bearing, that cause them concern. BCO 31 does not open the door for people making accusations against others without following Matthew 18.

In fact, a Christian is never allowed to make a negative report to anyone, including a church court, about another, and then walk away as if his duty is done. According to Colossians 3:16, Galatians 6:1 and Matthew 18:15ff, God requires him to take an active part in ministering to what he perceives to be an erring brother. He cannot foist off this duty to his friends, pastor, elders or a court. The Larger Catechism states the same in dealing with the sins forbidden in the ninth commandment by stating, "...*holding our peace when iniquity calleth for either a reproof from ourselves...*" (LC Q&A 145). Thus if a man believes a brother to be in "*iniquity*" HE is required to reprove it! In fact, he is in sin if he "*holds his peace*" or remains silent about it.

Normally speaking then if Matthew 18 is followed, the court should seldom hear of a problem until the entire process is followed, **unless** the matter is a "*public scandal*." A public offense, known to many, is sufficient cause for the court to investigate a situation. Say, for example, a man and woman decide to live together without getting married. They are open about this and everyone knows what is going on. But even in this situation, in effect, the elders must follow Matthew 18 in that the first step is to call the couple in to give an explanation. Maybe they are NOT "*living in sin*" but merely sharing a house. Granted, this may not be the wisest thing for them to do, but it is a little different to fornication. Only if that explanation is unsatisfactory does the Session then initiate an investigation that could lead to formal accusations.

Matthew 18 serves several distinct but important functions in resolving problems and promoting the peace and purity of the church. First, Matthew 18 eliminates gossip, slander and tale-bearing. The Westminster Confession of Faith, in the larger catechism (Q&A 145) is instructive here. *"The sins forbidden in the ninth commandment are all prejudicing the truth, and the good name of our neighbours... speaking the truth unseasonably, or maliciously to a wrong end...lying, slander, back-biting, detracting, tale-bearing, whispering, etc."* By the elders forcing a person to follow Matthew 18 and not giving him an opportunity to accuse the reputation of another before them, then a man either confronts the brother personally, or he must close his mouth. If he will not confront, then he may not speak of it to others; therefore this puts an immediate stop to gossip, slander, whispering and back-biting. As noted above, The Larger Catechism Q&A 145 **requires** a man to personally confront sin, and not to ask others to do it for him. The courts of the church, when requiring an accuser to follow Matthew 18 are in effect requiring him to keep the ninth commandment towards his brother.

Secondly, Matthew 18 forces accusations of sin to be backed up by two witnesses, before such accusations are made to the court. Often, personal offenses can be cleared up if the people actually talk to one another, and do not get others involved. But if the *"one on one"* conversation does not resolve the problem, then the two witnesses are there to confirm the facts. Perhaps the accused is guilty of sin, and now at least two, if not three witnesses can confirm to the court that the man is unrepentant. However, it may be just as likely that the two witnesses will see from the interaction that it is the accuser who is in sin, that his accusations are unjust, and therefore he needs to drop them and repent to his brother!

Thirdly, Matthew 18 works to keep the courts of church just. Scripture itself teaches that men have a tendency to believe the first report they hear about another (Pvbs 18:17). Thus, if men

were allowed to make any accusations they wanted, without following Matthew 18, then it is highly probable that the court would be prejudiced, by having heard only one side of the story. The ninth commandment requires judges to rule justly. However, Matthew 18 requires that any such accusations must come only after two witnesses can confirm the facts. Therefore, when two witnesses can testify to the offense, the court has every reason to believe that a violation has occurred, and can then lawfully initiate judicial process (provided they have actually conducted an investigation).

Even when a problem requires judicial action, the BCO still recommends that a committee from the court go to the accused and attempt to win him before a judgment is reached (BCO 31-7). Thus even at the stage where a trial may be warranted, or even in process, the BCO **still** encourages the court to attempt private reconciliation via Matthew 18.

Finally, Matthew 18 protects the accuser himself from being charged. False accusations against others are chargeable offenses according to BCO 31-9. If an accuser follows Matthew 18, then he has the two witnesses he needs to confirm his accusations. However, if there are not two witnesses, and the accusation is not confirmed, then he himself is guilty of sin and **must** be rebuked by the court.

Now there is one time when Matthew 18 is not required; when the court itself institutes prosecution (BCO 31-7). There are several possible reasons for this. First, if the court assigns some of its members to investigate a bad report, then the first step is giving the “*accused*” the opportunity to explain his actions and justify them. IF this committee is not satisfied with his response, they then return and recommend that the court should proceed with *process* (or trial), because they themselves are the requisite two witnesses against the accused. After all, they investigated the accusation, heard both sides of the story and were unsatisfied with the accused's response. This committee then may prosecute the

offense before the rest of the court but clearly, as noted earlier, they ought not to also then move from the prosecution's chair to the judge's bench.

On other occasions, the court may know about a particular sin, because they are pastors, as well as members of the court. It is likely that they have been involved with the accused in a pastoral setting; counselling, advising, admonishing, exhorting, etc. Thus, the court has already in effect fulfilled all the requirements of Matthew 18. They have established the facts and worked with the brother to bring about repentance. For example, say that a married couple comes in for pastoral counselling. In the course of the counselling, it becomes evident that one of the individuals involved has been having an extra-marital affair; an affair that the person refuses to stop. The pastor counsels, exhorts, and pleads, but the person remains unrepentant. In this case, a trial is warranted without following Matthew 18 because again, the basic steps have already been followed. The pastor and the injured spouse constitute the two witnesses and the counselling itself has fulfilled the requirement for personal confrontation. Yet note that even in this scenario, the BCO encourages that Matthew 18 is still appropriate even if the case goes to trial. The reason of course is that if convicted of any unrepentant sin, the sanction can be deadly serious; ultimately excommunication, which is a formal declaration by the church that the person convicted is in fact a *“gentile and unbeliever.”* This is such a serious sanction that **Christian love demands that the court do all it can to bring about repentance.**

TE Morton Smith, in his *Commentary on the Book of Church Order* says about BCO 31-7, *“Here the sound counsel is given to the courts of the Church to seek to handle matters privately with an offender before actually instituting process. This would apply in particular when the offense appears to have been against the court or its members.”* Thus even in these rare cases, the BCO still encourages the court to follow Matthew 18, even as they have been actively counselling

and ministering to an individual in sin and now have to bring formal process against him.

Conclusion

The steps outlined above are not simply to be dismissed, as legalistic rules that can be changed, avoided or suspended upon personal judgment. In fact, the procedures in the BCO represent five hundred years of practical ecclesiastical experience. This is **how** Presbyterians have vowed to resolve personal problems with each other, deal with sin, and restore erring brothers. The procedures, based firmly on a Reformed worldview, are thoroughly consistent with the Scriptures and the Confession. When ordained, every elder takes a solemn oath before God and his brother elders to follow these procedures when attempting to resolve accusations of sin.

Of course, every member of a church court will earnestly desire to avoid the problems mentioned at the beginning of this paper. We do not want frivolous charges being made, or foolish complaints to Presbytery or General Assembly about every action of a particular Session. Yet, at the same time, we agreed when we took our ordination vows that God has given these procedures to His church to maintain its peace and purity. It is not legalistic to demand that courts follow the constitution, but **absolutely necessary for an imperfect church to deal with imperfect men.**

Post Script

It can be argued that many modern Presbyterians have apparently adopted some form of “*Deconstructionism*” in that the constitution of the church is viewed as a “*living*” document that can be reinterpreted at will. I have personally witnessed many elders being openly contemptuous of the BCO, proud of their ignorance of it, and ridiculing those who actually understand it. Some seem to have adopted the “*democratic fallacy*” that they can

do whatever they want as long as they can get 51% of the court to side with them, despite what their own constitution says.

Thus the modern church has again been too often seduced by the basic thought forms and value structures of the world, rather than transforming the world as our Reformed ancestors did. **The result is that the courts of the church will not do the work of the church and conflicts go unresolved, churches are divided, and relationships destroyed.** Furthermore, since discipline is one of the marks of a true church, any court that systematically perverts justice by denying its own procedures has, in effect, become apostate. These are hard words, but if the words are hard, what of the actions of ungodly courts that persecute the innocent, and exalt the guilty? Showing partiality is a grievous sin and, as the previous chapters show, **injustice is rampant because the courts will not follow their own procedures.**

The answer, though, is not to flee into autonomy. But it may mean separating from those churches where justice is systematically ignored or perverted. The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:5 says, *"I say this to your shame, is it so that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren..."* But the sad fact is that often in our churches today, many elders either do not understand, or will not practice Biblical principles of justice; and the wise men Paul referred to appear thin on the ground. If we lose confidence in the ability of the church to rule wisely and justly, then what is the point to being a member?

At the beginning of this chapter, we acknowledged that there is no perfect justice. In so far as one can, the Christian ought to submit even to ungodly authorities for the sake of conscience (1 Peter 2:19). And therefore, there are many occasions when a court will rule against us in some form, but that ruling ought to be accepted in so far as it does not violate our conscience before God. So often the real problem is that our pride gets in the way. But if Christians lack confidence that the courts of the church can give justice, then there is no other option but to move to a church that

will. It is highly significant that the last judicial act that brought God's final judgment on the nation of Israel was the condemnation resulting from false accusations against our Lord, and his wrongful conviction and execution. Even though this was the means by which God would save His people, yet the nation itself was judged because of its injustice. That act of contempt by the courts of the Jewish church towards the universal standards of truth, fair evidence, accurate witnesses, etc., brought God's wrath on them in 70 AD. Modern Christians would do well to remember, and do better.

Critical Thinking and Ecclesiastical Judicial Process

How Church Courts Can Deny Justice by Bad Reasoning

***He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the
just, both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord
Proverbs 17:15***

Introuction: the Truth shall set you free...
Ever since I first signed up for email, I regularly receive dire warnings from various concerned Christians of some horrible problem about which they feel compelled to warn everyone they know. Usually, the “*dire warning*” then exhorts me to take some specific action such as “*Send this out to everyone in your email address book.*” The actual content of the “*dire warnings*” can vary considerably; it might have to do with a virus that will destroy my computer, a government policy that will lead to tyranny, or an exposé of the latest satanic conspiracy behind some commercial product, etc. It usually takes less than thirty seconds to type the specific “*dire warning*” threat into Google (or some other search engine), add the word “*hoax*” and then watch the computer screen fill up with various web-sites that reveal that, once again, Christians have been duped because they do not think before they react and press the *forward* button.

Now, the Internet is a haven for *pneumo-craniacs* (i.e., “*air-heads*”) of all descriptions, and of course, one can safely disregard the ravings of the racists, conspiracy nuts, flat-earth society proponents, etc. But the vast majority of these “*dire warnings*” I am talking about come from well-respected, well educated and

otherwise sane and sensible people. They are often pastors or professionals in charge of reputable ministries. They often write and preach about contemporary issues with clarity and power. But even so, they pass on, seemingly without a second thought, the most outrageous nonsense, because somewhere along the way they have either forgotten, or never learned, how to rationally and realistically evaluate evidence.

In a previous chapter (*Judicial Malfeasance*) we examined the integrity of contemporary church courts and compared them with the situation facing early Christians who were wrongfully accused and unlawfully convicted by both ecclesiastical and civil authorities. The emphasis in that study was essentially how ungodly men use the courts of the church to unlawfully persecute the innocent; and how lazy men allow it to happen.

However, as serious and important as that study was, there is an even more dangerous, though subtle problem facing Christians. What of good men, sincerely dedicated to doing the right thing, but who render ungodly judgments because they do not understand what constitutes legitimate proof of error? It is one thing for a self-consciously wicked man to bear false witness, twist the facts or use the courts to give legitimacy to an illegitimate act. But it is a whole different problem when good men arrive at bad decisions because they do not reason properly. Like the individuals mentioned above who accept some outrageous claim and forward it on to everyone they know, many Christians fail to properly and critically think about evidence when it is presented to them. They then render judgments that cannot even pass the “*smell*” test, often letting the guilty go free while persecuting the innocent. And because they do not understand **how** their convictions are influenced by certain sociological, psychological or intellectual dynamics, they unintentionally undermine justice and the credibility of discipline in the church.

In my college course entitled “*Critical Thinking Skills*” I try to provide my students with a basic mechanism to help them to

reason well about whatever claims come before them. All of us know that there are many tempting false ideas out there, just waiting for an opportunity to seduce our children into ungodliness. However, over the years I have also come to see that many, many of my brother elders need to take this same course. For when asked how they arrived at a particular decision, they all too often simply provide me with another illustration of flawed, uncritical thinking for my next class. The basic problem seems to be that most elders have developed an assumption that if they are *sincere* in their conclusions, then they have done everything God requires of them. It does not matter that their conclusions may be astoundingly irrational or that the evidence they use to arrive at a decision is utterly unsupportive; no, "*If I am sincere, then God is pleased with me.*"

Therefore, in this essay, I want to take some of the principles from the "*Critical Thinking Skills*" course and try to show how a lack of sound thinking often leads to injustice and tyranny in church courts; and better yet, how good critical thinking skills can prevent serious miscarriages of justice. In contrast to the previous essay, here we will assume that everyone involved in the process **wants** justice, but are led astray because they do not understand how to properly evaluate evidence. We will also assume that the responsible court has followed its investigatory procedures properly (but we will take several tangents in this regard as well as look at Appendix One) and that the charge is properly before the elders. This chapter primarily wants to examine how the elders then evaluate the evidence that is presented, and determine whether the verdict they reach is supported by that evidence.

Now granted, there are cases of church discipline wherein the evidence is simple to understand and fairly straightforward. If "Mr. X" is accused of lying, slandering, committing adultery, blasphemy, etc., then determining his guilt should be fairly easy; is there unambiguous evidence that "Mr. X" said "such and such" or did "such and such" on a particular occasion? The evidence is

usually provided by reference to the Biblical requirement of two or more witnesses who can verify that the accused actually **did** what he has been accused of doing. Of course, these witnesses, themselves, should already have gone to “*Mr. X*” as the first two steps of Matthew 18:15 and then only brought their accusation to the court because he did not repent - a process we have already discussed. But the “*facts*” can be sustained, because there is actual evidence that can be evaluated.

However, judicial cases are not always as straightforward as the example above and the evidence is not so easy to interpret. Often elders are handed a complex series of facts, counter-facts, opinions, etc., they must wade through to determine what really happened.

First, we need to lay down a basic presupposition that we will hit time and time again, because it is so often violated: **simply because an elder may be convinced that something is true, does not make that thing true.** This may seem so self-evident that it does not need to be stated so baldly, but experience shows that many Christians seem satisfied with a belief, just as long as he holds it sincerely. But our beliefs about something are distinct from whether that thing is true. Our God is the true God, and truth is a communicable attribute that we share with the Heavenly Father. Untruth, no matter how piously or sincerely held, does not honor Him. Therefore, when judging a man, which may result in bringing the most severe penalty the church can bring - excommunication, a love **for** truth and a commitment to finding it (within the limits of human ability) **must** be of paramount concern.

Complicating this matter is the fact that whether the average elder realizes it or not, there are often psychological and rational processes working in the background that may lead him to one conclusion or another; factors that have nothing to do with whether the evidence actually proves a “*fact*” but rather reside in the dynamics of how people form convictions. Research studies have shown (and we will discuss these a bit later) that people can

come to sincerely and earnestly believe things that are clearly erroneous.

In the subjective world of post-modern Deconstructionism where there is no objective truth, all that matters is one's personal convictions; but in the theistic world where a sovereign, true God rules according to His own immutable nature, truth stands distinct from our personal convictions. And God, in His grace, has given us intellectual mechanisms to determine truth from error. The great scientific revolution of the 19th century was only possible because of the principles of reasoning hammered out and made common by the Reformation. These principles were developed to ensure that our conclusions from Scripture were accurate. These same intellectual tools form the basis of the book of Proverbs where we are constantly exhorted and encouraged to gain wisdom and understanding. Therefore, it is never enough to say, "*I am personally convinced that Mr. X is guilty*" if there is not sufficient evidence to support that claim.

This love and commitment to truth, and the diligent, conscientious attempt to find it by careful reasoning, is just as important in an ecclesiastical trial as it is in exegesis. Every godly pastor sincerely wants to understand a passage of Scripture and then deliver its message faithfully to his congregation. He does not want his misunderstanding to lead the congregation astray. Yet often this same man will not use the same intellectual tools in considering evidence in a trial. Perhaps part of the problem is that often determining the truth in a court case is not as clear-cut as parsing all one's verbs correctly or correlating the meaning of a passage with an objective doctrinal standard such as the Westminster Confession. For example, say that Mr. X makes an unflattering comment about a brother; does this constitute slander? If so, **how** does the court determine that "*this*" remark is slander, but "**that**" remark was just an innocent jest?

Unlike an exercise in a formal logic class, real life seldom comes neatly packaged for our understanding. And sometimes, in

determining the truth of a situation, so that we might rightly rebuke the guilty, and preserve the reputation of the innocent, church courts have to struggle with varying accounts, ambiguous testimony, and confusion of facts. At the risk of being redundant, often people assume that a man **is** guilty if the court is “convinced” of his guilt. But the problem here is that without understanding the psychological dynamics of **how** people become convinced of something, unwittingly, justice can be perverted. It is the church courts most solemn duty before God and the accused to make sure that in so far as limited men can, they determine the **truth** of the situation. And before issuing a conviction, they must understand the difference between a subjective, inner conviction, and whether a “*fact*” has been proven.

Thus there is a distinction between the sincere opinions of a court, and whether that court has actually established the truth; especially whether they have **proved** a person's guilt. However, from examining various church trials over the past decade (or reading the records of various cases), it appears that the operating assumption of the average elder is that if 51% of the court **believes** something to be so, it **is** so. Yet such courts can often be misled. Seriously so. Because they do not always understand the process by which they arrived at their belief. Thus they issue judicial declarations that are unlawful, unjust, unfair and inaccurate. One of the reasons why Presbyterians have higher courts is to ensure that there is always a process available by which the decision of a lower court might be reviewed. But if the higher courts use the same flawed rationality in reaching its decision, then justice will be thwarted.

Granted, this process can work both ways; a man guilty of a chargeable offense might well be “*let off*” simply because the court likes the individual and “*I could never believe that Bob would ever do such a thing.*” Even General Assemblies have been known to refuse to prosecute clear offenses because the man charged was highly regarded and the court did not want to offend him. I have actually

read public statements, written by esteemed brethren making public declarations that they would refuse to recognize another court's conviction because "*We know Mr. X and he could never do such a thing*" without ever examining the actual judicial process. They thereby denied the doctrine of total depravity; **of course** "*Mr. X*" could do "*that*;" we all sin. The issue is whether the court reasoned properly from sufficient evidence to prove that sin.

There is of course another aspect to this consideration; sometimes a court may not be able to prove that a man is guilty, even though in reality he is. But that is the limitation of all human courts; only God knows the heart, and only God knows the ultimate truth. Unrepentant men ought not to feel confident that they escaped justice in a church court simply because their sins could not be proven beyond a "*shadow of doubt*." For God is the ultimate judge; and they **will** stand accountable before Him – either at the end of time, and perhaps even sooner.

Either way, when justice is denied then everyone suffers and the integrity of the court is compromised. And if church courts do **not** give justice, then they have lost one of the marks of a true church. The guilty then go free, the innocent can be wrongfully convicted, and conflicts that could be resolved end up causing frustration, bitterness and schism.

The purpose of discipline is **always** primarily restoration; the courts exist to rebuke unrepentant sin and help us adjudicate our problems so that we can live in peace and purity with one another. The very purpose of discipline is to bring sanctions on an unrepentant sinner so that he might be brought to repentance and be reconciled to God and his brother. And when properly done, a church court speaks with the genuine authority of God (cf. Matt 18:15-20 but especially verse 18 and its context of a church trial).

But if we misunderstand **how** to properly determine if a man is actually guilty of unrepentant sin, and declare him guilty when he is not, there are two profound implications. The first is that we have become false prophets saying "*thus says the Lord*" when He has

not spoken. It is a serious thing indeed to falsely claim divine authority when we are in error. **The heretic claiming to speak for God when he espouses his error is blasphemous and rightly condemned by the orthodox Christian church. But really, is a court that pronounces judicial error in the name of Christ any different?**

The second is that we create an unconscionable situation for the convicted; what can he do when he is declared guilty but he knows that he is innocent? **How can a man, wrongfully convicted because the judges at his trial came to an erroneous conclusion, ever be restored?** If he admits his “*guilt*” when he has not in fact sinned, then he is sinning before God. Yet, if he maintains his innocence, despite a wrongful conviction, then he is accused of contumacy and excommunicated!

The key then is to ensure that **before** a man is convicted of any sin, the elders understand the proper process to ensure that the evidence actually justifies the verdict. And to do that, we need to look carefully at how men form conclusions in the first place.

Definitions

In order to understand how evidence in a church case ought to be evaluated, first we need to define just what we mean by “*critical thinking*.” Critical thinking is simply clearly, accurately and fairly evaluating the reasons for accepting or rejecting some idea, or taking or not taking some action. Clearly, in our common experience, we all understand that people can sincerely believe something for the wrong reasons. Critical thinking means that we analyze **why** we believe whatever we believe, to make sure that the criteria we are using can be justified before God.

The goal of critical thinking is to guarantee, as far as possible, and within the limits of human intelligence, that one's beliefs and actions can withstand the test of rational analysis. Our God is the true God who reasons; Jesus is the “*logos*” or “*logic*” of God – the visible “*Word*” made flesh. Therefore in the character and nature of

God we have an objective basis to determine whether our conclusions are either logically derived from the premises or they are not. The premises are either valid or they are not. Good reasoning is simply ensuring that both premises and conclusions are based on sound criteria. Sometimes evaluating evidence is as easy as writing a syllogism to determine whether the conclusion of the court is logically derived from the premises (in this case, the evidence presented). It is not always this simple of course, but simple logic ought to be at least a starting point.

One important presupposition that logically derives from the above definition is that the emphasis on evaluating any evidence must **never** be based on the feelings of the judges about the accused, but rather on the actual evidence before them. When serving as a juror in a civil or criminal trial, the jury is carefully instructed to base their findings of fact on the evidence presented before it. This process itself is an outgrowth of Christian presuppositions; our ancestors assumed the existence of absolute truth based on the nature of God, and had a high regard for the moral law on bearing false witness. This was more than just a prohibition against lying under oath, but as the WCF larger catechism explains, requires a sincere and dedicated commitment to finding the truth, within the limits of human ability.

Ever wondered why secular courts say, “*not guilty*” rather than “*innocent?*” The reason of course is that because of the limitations of human beings, we cannot determine whether a man is innocent of anything; all we can say is whether or not the evidence presented actually proves his guilt. This again is a Christian presupposition; only God as the final Judge knows the true state of man's heart, or even whether or not His law was violated on a certain occasion. Men, by definition, are finite, limited creatures. When they serve as judges, they cannot take to themselves the attributes of God and claim omniscience. As the WCF clearly states, **all councils and synods may err; therefore the burden of proof is ALWAYS on the accuser, not the accused.**

Scripture itself **requires** every fact to be confirmed before it can be admitted as evidence (cf. Matt 18:16 as well as 1 Tim 5: 19, Deut 17:6, 19:1, etc.). Thus it is not enough for an elder to sincerely **believe** someone is guilty of something, he must have an **objective** basis to confirm that belief **before** he can determine whether or not the accused is guilty of an offence.

In Biblical Law, reiterated in the New Testament, a charge must be supported by at least two witnesses (Matt 18:15ff). **However, even if there are two witnesses, this still does not mean that the charge is necessarily proven; witnesses can bear false witness, or give inaccurate testimony. The Lord Jesus and Stephen the martyr were both convicted and executed on the basis of more than two witnesses; but the witnesses were lying. The whole context of the Ninth Commandment is judicial in focus. If God includes within the narrow scope of His moral Law a prohibition against bearing false witness surely the problem is common?**

But men can bear false witness without any intention to deceive. They themselves may have sincerely reached an erroneous conclusion based on faulty reasoning. Therefore a court of the church has the necessary duty to determine whether the witnesses are giving true and accurate testimony. Did they actually see or hear what they claimed to have seen or heard, or are they passing on hearsay? Do they have a grudge against the accused? It is not simply a matter of accepting whatever testimony comes before the court because the court **must** determine if the testimony is actually credible; and there are many factors that church courts often fail to take into consideration when evaluating evidence.

For example, one of the basic rules of evidence that is often violated by non-critical thinking church courts is hearsay. Hearsay is information received from another that cannot be adequately substantiated. It is routinely disallowed in civil courts because its value is no better than gossip or rumor (the actual process is more complicated than this). **When a witness reports something**

they received from someone else, the value of the information ought to be discounted by the court because it cannot be substantiated; an assertion is not the same thing as proof. Yet, many elders will receive and act on hearsay testimony and will actually say something like, **“I know this is true because Brother 'G' said so and Brother 'G' wouldn't lie.”** There are all sorts of problems with this kind of reasoning and perhaps now it is time to look at some of the underlying dynamics of how people arrive at conclusions to see why this is not the way to decide a case.

Problems with Memory

The first problem that church courts face in evaluating evidence has to do with how people remember things. Every criminal prosecutor will tell you that they much prefer hard, forensic evidence over eye-witness testimony which is notoriously unreliable. **Studies in learning have shown a disturbing tendency for people to construct their memories after the fact, and that our memories are susceptible to suggestions from others.** In other words, our memories are **not** an organic version of a video-camera accurately recording events, but rather are more like a documentary that has been edited by our own personalities, prejudices, and preconceived ideas of what we **think** happened. In fact, different people witnessing the same event often have diametrically opposed memories of what happened. They see some things, but miss others, and then their minds fill in the discrepancies between the two. Often therefore they can solemnly and sincerely testify to something when in reality the event they are remembering is a creation of their own minds.

False Memory Syndrome

Back in the eighties and nineties, there was a rash of convictions in the civil courts of sexual abuse based on the supposed suppressed memories that only came out under intense

psychological therapy. People went to prison, often for years, for sexually abusing children before it was discovered that the victims' "memories" were actually unintentionally created by the therapists! It is not as if the therapists were necessarily evil monsters attempting to ruin innocent people's lives; almost everyone believes them to have been "sincere." But their "counselling" methodology had certain presuppositions that interpreted the client's problems in a particular way; and they then developed a methodology that created what is known as False Memory Syndrome.

The therapist began with the assumption that some sort of hidden trauma in the patient's past was causing their current life problems. When the patients could not identify any particular trauma, the therapist, convinced that such trauma **had** to exist, then speculated that the trauma was **so** severe, that it must have been psychologically suppressed. Therefore, they had a duty to "uncover" these "hidden" memories; often through hypnosis or other means. Since sexual abuse is one of the most horrendous crimes which can be committed against a child, the therapist would "suggest" this as a possible explanation. The "victims" trusting the "wisdom" and professional expertise of their counsellor (see the section on suggestibility below) sincerely came to believe they had been abused. They then created specific memories of how and when such abuse took place, complete with convincing details. The therapists sincerely believed they had been abused; the prosecutors, juries and judges were sincerely convinced they had been abused; and some people spent years in prison as a result.

But in fact, **no** abuse had **ever** taken place. Only after years of investigation and a careful analysis of actual "hard" evidence could it be shown that the memories were false and had been implanted by the therapists. But a lot of lives were ruined, because the courts depended too much on the memories of the "victims."

Furthermore, memory is a tricky thing; good research studies have shown that an event that we witness is filtered through our

own presuppositions and evaluations and as time goes by, we tend to bring the memories into line with what we **think** happened, as opposed to what we actually saw. This phenomenon is well established by the research literature. There is no significant correlation between the *accuracy* of a memory, and the *subjective feeling of certainty* a person has about the memory. In other words, just because a person is firmly convinced that he remembers something accurately, does not mean that his conviction is true. Therefore a witness can sincerely stand before a court giving the truth **as he sees it**, with no intention of deliberately bearing false witness, and yet still be **giving** false testimony.

This is why cross-examination and hearing **both** sides of an issue is essential **before** the court reaches a decision. If they hear only one side, and the witness is "*sincere*" then the tendency will be to accept that testimony as true. However, if allowed to cross-examine the witness, the defense might well be able to show that the memory is inaccurate. Documents might be offered, or the testimony of other people present at the same incident might well show that the original testimony just cannot stand up to scrutiny.

Yet, when testimony is received by many church courts, the only issue seems to be the sincerity of the witness. "*Well, Mrs. Y has no reason to lie so her story must be true.*" Yes, "*Mrs. Y*" **may** be sincere, but that does not mean that her testimony is accurate. If **her** testimony conflicts with **another** person's testimony, then the court does **not** have to make the hard choice of whom to believe; because the issue is **whether or not the fact can be confirmed**. If she remembers something one way, and someone else testifies to it happening a different way, then her testimony must be discarded, without calling her reputation into question; different people remember different things, well, differently. Just because she **insists** that she has definite memories does not mean those memories are accurate. Thus, those memories alone cannot be the substance of a conviction.

Church courts need to have firmly in their minds the

presupposition that **before** they hear any evidence, a witness can sometimes be **certain** in his mind of specific facts, but may well have remembered them incorrectly. **Hence, the court may not accept such testimony as “facts” unless it can be verified or confirmed by separate testimony or evidence.**

Problems in Self-deception and Wishful Thinking

Secondly, in this line, **all men tend towards self-deception, putting their own actions in the best possible light while not always being so charitable about the actions of others.** For example, over the years, studies and surveys done in the academic community show that 94% of university professors think they are better at their jobs than their colleagues! 25% of college students believe they are in the top 1% of their class! 70% of college students think they are above average in leadership ability; only 2% think they are below average! Now clearly the above statistics are “*fun*” but they also reveal empirically the fundamental truth that Scripture revealed, **“the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked, who can know it?”** Thus, even the most “*sincere*” witnesses might well be self-deceived; again, they are not intentionally trying to mislead the court, but their testimony cannot be sustained by actual evidence. Hence, just because a man **says** something is true, does not make it true. Nor can a court assume it is true just because he seems sincere and trustworthy.

Christians often make this mistake when dealing with each other; since we assume that a “*good*” man would not **intentionally** distort or misreport the truth, therefore, his testimony can be accepted at face value. “*Well I've known Mr. Z for years and he is a godly man, and a godly man wouldn't lie!*” No, he may not be intentionally lying, but he may not be accurately evaluating the “*facts*” or giving an accurate assessment of a situation he personally witnessed. Unless there was a video camera or some other recording device, what actually happened is being filtered through Mr. Z's personality, life experiences, intelligence, presuppositions,

etc. He then is putting the best “*spin*” on his actions, and the worst on those of his opponent. He may be sincerely reporting the situation **as he sees it**, but since church courts are supposed to be dealing with issues of truth, his testimony should not be accepted at face value. Can he point to specific words that were said, actions that were taken, etc., that **demonstrate** that his testimony is accurate? And furthermore, is there a second witness who can verify it? If not, then no matter how sincere Mr. Z might be, his testimony cannot be accepted as sufficient evidence for a conviction.

Again, this is one of the reasons why **testimony must always be subjected to cross-examination before it is accepted by the court**. The accused must be given an opportunity to challenge the witness's account, perhaps asking questions that might throw the testimony into an entirely different light if given the opportunity. Context is everything and sometimes only under cross-examination can the context be brought out that shows the evidence in a completely new light.

An example I often use is a poor joke based on my military “*career*.” Since I served six years in the Air Force, many people ask me, “*What kind of plane did you fly?*” assuming of course, that everyone in the Air Force **must** be a pilot. The reality of course is that for every pilot, there must be hundreds of personnel that serve as ground crews, mechanics, supply personnel, medical technicians, clerks, drivers, cooks and what-have-you to maintain the aircraft and provide the technological infrastructure for the pilot and flight crew to perform **their** jobs. But most people don't appreciate this.

Since I have a stupid sense of humor, sometimes when people would ask me “*What kind of plane did you fly?*” I used to respond by saying, “*a Mark-4 BFD.*” In military slang, a “*BFD*” means “*Big Freaking Desk.*” It is an old joke, and never was very funny - but it usually got a little smile from people when I explained it. However, occasionally, when this question came up, and I gave my regular

answer, something would happen so that either I did not have a chance to explain the joke, **or** someone overheard the first part, but missed the second. And **some** people went away assuming that I was a “*no good liar*” because everyone “*knows*” that there is no such designation as “*BFD*” for USAF aircraft!

Now, if someone wanted to accuse me of bearing false witness, would the charge be accurate? Yet this is the very kind of misunderstanding that often comes before a church court when someone is accused of sin. He said one thing, someone heard something different, or did not understand the context, and an accusation was made. But if such a silly incident **did** come before a church court, and the accuser was asked to give testimony, they could sincerely testify under oath that they heard “*Brian said he flew a BFD in the Air Force.*” And then another witness could testify, “*There is no such designator as BFD for USAF aircraft.*” A third person could then come along and testify that “*Brian served as an enlisted person in the Air Force, never rising above the rank of staff-sergeant.*” Then another person could testify that “*Only commissioned officers can be pilots in the USAF.*” The court then could logically conclude that since I was never an officer, I could never have been a pilot. Since I was never a pilot, I **must** have been bearing false witness when I said I flew a BFD. And since there is no such thing as a “*BFD*” then, clearly, I must have been lying about my military service.

And though the conclusion logically follows from the premises, they missed the entire context of the remarks; no one who had ever served in the USAF would **ever** think “*BFD*” meant anything other than a slightly humorous joke. All it would take to clear up the confusion would be a simple cross-examination of the witnesses **before** a judgment was reached.

Now what justifies this tangent of whether or not I ever flew a “*BFD*?” I have either known men, or read the record of the case of men who were convicted, censured and sometimes even excommunicated on just this kind of evidence. People gave

testimony that put the accused in a bad light, and the accused was not allowed to challenge that testimony before a conclusion was reached. The court responsible essentially conducted a “*secret trial*” to determine the guilt or innocence of the accused and received only that evidence that seemed certain to convict. Then, when the accused was brought forward to be confronted, the court had already made its mind up about his guilt before hearing anything he had to say. They demanded that he repent, or suffer a formal trial where his “*sins*” would be exposed to the world. And throughout this process, the men **on** the court were sincerely convinced they had found the truth and were simply doing their “*hard duty*” of bravely confronting sin.

Yet a simple cross examination of the witnesses would have revealed that the “*facts*” before the court were being misunderstood or misinterpreted. But the accused was never given the opportunity to defend himself **before** the court had already reached a verdict. And **because of the way our minds work, once we have reached a conclusion, we tend to interpret all new information in light of that assumption** (more about this later) rather than being open to changing our minds. Sadly, this is a subject we will return to time and time again in this essay simply because it happens so often, and the perpetrators do not seem to think they are doing anything wrong!

Psychological and sociological hindrances

There are four other factors that ought to be briefly considered when evaluating evidence; **suggestibility, deference to experts, conformity behaviour** and **bias**. *Suggestibility* is tending to accept claims as true, without examining the evidence that supports them. The opening illustration about “*dire warnings*” being sent through email is an example of this process. Usually, when I tried to track down where the “*dire warning*” originated, people would say that they got the story from a “*reputable*” person, who in turn got the story from another “*reputable*” source, etc.

Each person was willing to accept the story at face value, because they received it from someone they trusted. **None** of these people however took thirty seconds to check the story out by simply doing a brief Internet search to see if it was a hoax. Furthermore, some of these people were really offended when I pointed out that this was a hoax, crying, *“I was only trying to warn people about something I believed to be a serious problem.”* From an irrational, uneducated person this might be acceptable; but if a pastor or writer is not rational enough to check out the facts before reaching a conclusion, a conclusion they then want others to accept and act on, what does that say about their preaching and teaching?

Suggestibility often influences court decisions when someone accuses another of a sin, but summarizes that sin without giving specific details. *“Mr. A is a stubborn man who will not listen to others.”* This comment might not be intended to be an insult, but rather a summary of a man's character, which could be used to show that a particular problem arose from a particular character trait. However, on what basis does the court accept **this** assessment of a man's character? Is it received and acted on **because** a witness testified to it? But where are the actual incidents used to support this summary? Sadly, the follow up question is not asked, because the court is open to suggestibility; they know the witness, they assume he wouldn't intentionally deceive them and therefore they form an opinion based not on facts, but simple suggestibility.

Often, courts will accept such negative testimony about a man's character, and then interpret everything else in light of that testimony because they have heard it from several different sources. Psychological studies have shown that our confidence in the accuracy of a report is in direct proportion to whether there are multiple sources; i.e., if we hear the same *“fact”* from two or more different sources, then we tend to assume the *“fact”* to be confirmed. Now, when this is properly done, it basically follows the Biblical requirement of there being two or more witnesses.

However, elders often do not evaluate the source of those

“facts.” Has a man been the victim of slander, gossip, unfair treatment or even character assassination? Sometimes a person can receive a bad reputation, not for anything he has done or said, but simply because some people do not like him and gossip about him; one person says something nasty to another, who receives it, believes it and becomes convinced of it. The second person then passes the negative assessment on to a third, who passes it on to a fourth. And as a result, *“everyone knows”* that Mr. G. is a *“bad guy”* and any number of witnesses will stand before the court willing to testify to that *“fact.”*

One recent incident highlights the danger of suggestibility and accepting negative reports as being confirmed based on inadequate data. A colleague of mine was recently censured by a church court for *“lying about his military career.”* I received an email from the pastor who convened the court, showing me a web-site where my colleague's name was mentioned on their *“wall of shame”* for those perfidious people who claim to have been Special Forces operatives but had never served. I looked at the site and found a disclaimer where the administrator said that the people on the wall of shame had been **reported** to have claimed to have been Special Forces, when they were not. The web-site did not do any investigation of whether the report was true. If someone said, *“Mr. X has claimed to have been Special Forces”* they just listed the person's name and left it up to the accused to prove their innocence!

However, on investigation, it seems that the witness who had accused my colleague in the first place before the church courts, was the **same** individual who had written to the web-site; essentially repeating his accusation. The pastor simply **accepted** the claim because the web-site looked official, and then proudly cited it to me as confirmation that his court's decisions had been validated because *“Even the Special Forces association agrees with us that Mr. X is a liar!”* But the web-site confirms nothing; it merely repeats the original accusation made by the same person! This elder and his entire session fell victim to suggestibility and did not

confirm the facts before issuing a judicial judgment. As a result, not only have they done incalculable harm to a man's reputation, but destroyed the integrity and reputation of their own church.

Sadly, gossip and slander are not uncommon, but elders entrusted with the responsibility of determining a man's guilt ought to be held to a higher standard and should be able to recognize that bad reports, even ones coming from two or more sources, do not necessarily **prove** anything unless those reports can be confirmed. Where is the evidence **behind** the reports to “*prove*” that the accused did whatever he is supposed to have done? Usually though, too many elders are willing to simply accept a summary of someone's character, and then assume that the summary is true.

Going back a moment to a point we raised earlier, by simply giving credence to a summary of a situation, without actually discovering the specifics that should support such an assessment, a court that does not recognize how suggestibility works can be prejudiced against the accused before he has had a chance to give a defense. Then everything the accused says **after** that is interpreted in light of the original assumption that he is guilty; an assumption that was never verified!

In some church courts, wherein the accused is known to the judges, his reputation may have influenced the judges before they ever heard the case; this is called “*bias*.” In churches where gossip is not restrained, whole courts may be prejudiced against an individual even before any formal accusation ever comes before them. Everyone is convinced that “*Mr. B*” is a “*bad*” person, even though no one can point to a specific sin he might have committed. He is “*bad*” maybe because he simply rubs people up the wrong way, threatens people's personal comfort zone, or just does not have a warm, attractive personality. **And never underestimate the fact that Mr. “B” may be disliked simply because others are envious of his gifts, jealous of his success or covetous of his blessings.** But because of suggestibility, people are willing to

receive a bad report about him and believe it, and most frighteningly of all, issue judicial declarations based on it; all without one shred of actual evidence that he ever did anything wrong.

Because of bias, a court can be negatively predisposed to interpret evidence in such a way that it confirms their prejudices and by being “*suggestible*” they can accept testimony simply because it agrees with their own preconceived, negative view of the accused. But, in the name of justice, an ecclesiastical court simply cannot convict people of sin just because they do not like the accused, or that getting rid of certain people would make their life easier.

Suggestibility increases if the proponent has “*prestige*,” i.e. acknowledged dignity or authority such as a college professor, successful authors or even film stars. In the church, we too recognize “*prestige*”; there are some people we highly respect because of their knowledge, service, character or ministry. Therefore if a witness is highly esteemed, his testimony tends to be more readily accepted by the court than others with less prestige, regardless of whether the “*esteemed*” testimony is actually substantiated. Again, this is usually an unconscious process; we just tend to place more emphasis on the testimony of some people than we do on that of others. But in doing so, the court is potentially misunderstanding, or misinterpreting the evidence, giving unfair weight to some people who have “*prestige*” in our group.

For example, say that a negative report is received about a new teaching elder from one of his ruling elders. The ruling elder is well known, well liked and highly respected. Therefore, it is likely that those who do not understand the psychological dynamics of how people form convictions, will tend to accept and believe these accusations simply because they know “Bob” and have had a good relationship with him but they do not know “Gary” who is a relative newcomer. The same dynamic can work the opposite way

of course; “Gary” the teaching elder, might well bring a bad report about “Bob” and because “Gary” is the pastor, his report is received and accepted as true, without anyone actually evaluating it to see whether it can be confirmed.

What is shocking though is that elders, who have the responsibility for teaching the people of God and adjudicating disputes when they occur, do not seem to understand **the most basic principles of relationships that the Bible requires; gossip is a nasty sin** and ought to be recognized for what it is! Matthew 18:15, Galatians 6:1 and numerous other passages do not exempt elders from the requirement that **when an offense has been committed, there is only one of two options (1) allow love to cover a multitude of transgressions and overlook the offense or (2) go to the offender privately and personally and deal with it, only bringing others in if the personal confrontation does not bring about a resolution.** There is no third option that allows some people to “share” derogatory information about someone else to their friends, pastors, or elders.

Our point here of course is that for a lawful conviction to occur, the evidence **must** support the testimony; testimony that cannot even be received **unless** Matthew 18:15 has been followed. We certainly are not allowed to hear one side of the story, reach a conclusion and then condemn a man before he has an opportunity to defend himself against the accusations or challenge the testimony against him. Even great men can err, misunderstand events, misinterpret facts, or fall victim to the other problems we have mentioned.

Another problem that affects our ability to properly and rationally evaluate evidence is called *conformity behaviour* or the tendency for people to adjust their beliefs, values and even perceptions to perceived group norms. Research has shown that people will distrust even their own perceptions; if that perception differs from the group. For example, in the classic college experiment, 10 people are shown two lines, one of which is clearly

longer than the other. But nine of the “*subjects*” are actually “*stooges*” who when asked an opinion, say that the lines are actually the same size. The experimenter goes down the line asking each person until he comes to the actual subject. The last person has just seen nine of his peers report something different from his own perception. Either just to fit in, or perhaps because he begins to doubt his own senses, he tends to report what everyone else has reported, even if he **knows** that they are all wrong.

Every parent knows, and is concerned about, the dangers of “*peer pressure*” or the tendency for teens to want to fit in with their friends, adjusting their behaviour to reflect the standards of those around them. But parents often do not understand that the very same principle works on them with **their** peers! It is just a “*fact*” of human experience that we tend to conform to the practices, beliefs, assessments and values of those around us. The Bible recognizes this dynamic in 1 Corinthians 15:33, “*Do not be deceived, bad company corrupts good morals*” and conversely the positive side in 1 Cor 11:1 “*Be imitators of me as I also am of Christ*” (see also Phil 4:9).

Therefore, in an ecclesiastical trial, the court ought to be aware of this tendency both in the way they evaluate testimony coming from others as well as how it may influence their own decision-making process. With regard to others, a person might be accused, and testimony made against him **because** others have already made up their minds about him, based on peer pressure. Someone may have a grudge against the accused. If that person has “*prestige*” and gossiped to others, then because of suggestibility, many people will be sincerely convinced that the gossip is true. If the gossip is widely accepted, conformity behaviour means that others will tend to adapt their beliefs about this person to the beliefs of others. As a result, there are not really two witnesses against him; really only one witness whose testimony is being repeated by different people!

This is one of the reasons why gossip is so dangerous in the

church; a man's reputation can be destroyed, not for anything he actually said or did, but simply because conformity behaviour means that if whispering and back-biting go unchecked, people unconsciously become negatively disposed towards him. That negative predisposition in turn then colours the perception of every word he speaks, every action he takes.

How does this dynamic affect an elder evaluating evidence? Unless he is very careful, it is very possible that the opinions of the other judges may well be more important in forming his "*convictions*" about the guilt or innocence of the accused, than his own careful assessment of the evidence. Conformity behaviour means that if the group tends to believe the accused is guilty, then the individual elder will tend to go along with the group.

This is not a new problem. It was traditional in the Sanhedrin (the Supreme Court of ancient Israel) for the youngest members to give their judgment **before** the older and more esteemed members, just so the young men would not base their decision on the prestige of their elders. This same dynamic can be seen in any congregational meeting; the next time a vote is called, watch the dynamics of the group. Some people will immediately raise their hands (or voices) in aye or nay; but many people will actually wait until they can see which way the majority is going **before** they themselves will vote. This is not necessarily moral cowardice; just the natural human tendency to want to fit in and not be on the "*outside*."

Elders though, when determining a man's guilt, must not give their consciences over to the group; God will hold each individual accountable for **every** decision he makes. Sometimes, many times, the group is wrong and a godly man **must** be willing to stand for the truth. Praise God for Martin Luther, John Calvin and the Puritan martyrs murdered by Bloody Mary Tudor. All of them stood by the truth when it would have been so much easier to "*go along to get along*." But somehow, many today seem to have forgotten this wonderful heritage and too often, just want to "*fit*

in.”

Another problem is the tendency to accept that which confirms our already held beliefs and reject that which would overturn them. While we discuss this in more detail in another chapter, here it is important to note that none of us are totally objective or without some sort of preconceived framework to interpret incoming data. There are no “*brute*” facts, only interpreted ones, and the presuppositions a person holds going into an issue can essentially make him blind to those “*facts*” that would make him reconsider his opinions. We tend to easily accept “*evidence*” that confirms our biases but carefully scrutinize, devalue or ignore evidence that would require us to rethink the issue.

There is no easy way around this dynamic other than to recognize it exists and do our best to acknowledge our presuppositions. **We can protect ourselves by refusing to form an opinion until all the evidence is in.** We can listen carefully to **all** the evidence, and ask ourselves whether or not **this** actually proves **that**, regardless of whether it fits within our preconceived frame-work. Men are not perfected saints and we will all undoubtedly fall short but if we understand this dynamic, we can at least try to move beyond our biases.

Men have been wrongfully convicted in church courts, not for any sin they committed but because the other elders simply did not like his stand on Creation, the Law, or some other theological controversy. Sometimes, they just did not like his personality or his ministry style. Then, when an accusation against him came before the courts, they were already negatively predisposed towards him, regardless of whether he had actually done anything wrong. All it took was for one or two judges who were biased to convince the rest of the court that the man was guilty. **Suggestibility, conformity behaviour and bias all work together to convince the average presbyter a conviction is in order even when there is no evidence of an actual sin.**

In secular courts, judges are routinely required to recuse

themselves if it can be shown that they might have some personal bias that could influence their impartiality in applying the law to a case. Prospective jurors are routinely excused from duty if it can be shown that they hold some belief or bias that might affect their ability to objectively weigh the facts of a case. Yet, Christians do not seem to appreciate that they too can be biased about a situation. Not being formally trained in logic, or even the rules of evidence, elders often do not properly evaluate testimony to determine whether it actually constitutes reliable evidence; because their only issue is whether they are personally “*convinced*.” They therefore can sometimes believe things with no basis in fact and convict innocent men (or let guilty men go free) simply because they do not understand how their own minds become convinced of something. **Simply because we may be sincerely convinced of something does not make that thing true!**

Problems with Credibility

Credibility is a sociological phenomenon, not a logical one. What is *credible* is simply that which is “*believable*” which only means that the conclusion fits within the parameters of our own presuppositions. Hence, credibility and truth are not the same thing. People have believed many erroneous or even silly things in the past; i.e., spontaneous generation, or that the world was flat, or that the universe revolved around the earth. In the same way, a court might well find something “*credible*” simply because it fits within the framework of their presuppositions and biases. However, simply because we might think that something is believable is simply irrelevant to whether or not it is true.

Credibility, though, is often considered the most important aspect in evaluating evidence. The average elder is faced with various witnesses, conflicting testimony, divergent accounts of the same events, and he must determine which witness or evidence is “*credible*” and which is not. However, the basis of what constitutes “*credibility*” is often subjective and not really a basis for

a rational conviction. Some elders will find testimony “credible” simply because it fits within the parameters they have already established. For example, say that suggestibility, bias and conformity behaviour are all operating before a case is heard. The elder listens to testimony and receives evidence against the accused and then interprets all this through a pre-existing, but unacknowledged psychological filter. The result is that he can find certain testimony “credible” for no better reason other than it fits within the prejudices he already has established. Such evidence is “credible” only because it confirms what he already believed to be true.

Thus, just because a witness or his testimony is credible, does not mean that his testimony is necessarily accurate. For example, as mentioned previously, a person giving “evidence” may have no motivation for bearing false witness. But he may not have seen what he thinks he saw. He might have remembered things inaccurately. He might have high credibility because he is an elder, a friend, a “nice guy.” He himself might be the victim of personal bias, suggestibility, have listened to gossip, etc.

Yet often, when testimony is being evaluated, there will be those on the court who will say something to the effect, “Well, Mr. A is a very credible witness and I believe him.” However, under cross-examination, other factors might come out that throw Mr. A’s testimony into dispute; for example, other witnesses could show that he was not present during a particular conversation, or that his report does not fit with something that can be established by hard, documentary evidence.

Clearly, there is legitimate and illegitimate credibility. Some witnesses and certain types of evidence have no legitimate credibility; for example, someone who has had a long and nasty relationship with the accused ought to have his testimony very carefully weighed before being accepted. A man known for bearing false witness, or having an axe to grind, etc., ought to be discounted as a witness. But even so the problem seems to fall

experientially on the other side; elders reaching conclusions based not on actual hard evidence, but on the witness they deem more credible. And the problem is that we are too often willing to believe only those things that confirm our preconceived ideas.

Problems with Presuppositions

In light of the above, without going too far off into the area of philosophy, all men have various emotional or psychological agendas that interpret what data they receive and which they will reject (more on this later). When evaluating testimony, one of the objectives of the court ought to be to understand the presuppositions of both the accused and his accusers (not to mention their own). Sometimes it is a failure to recognize how our presuppositions are affecting our ability to evaluate the evidence that leads to injustice.

Part of the problem of course, addressed in other chapters, is that some elders do not really understand the role of ecclesiastical judgments; in effect they have the wrong presuppositions about what they are supposed to do as judges, which significantly affects how they determine a verdict. The average presbyter is rightly concerned about bringing a guilty man to repentance. But he can err because he **knows** that the worst sins are the ones inside; after all, we have our Lord's own warnings about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees deeply ingrained in our thinking. Thus, when a case comes before a court, many elders want to bring a man to genuine repentance and not allow him to walk away being "*innocent*" on the outside, but seething with guilt and sin on the inside.

This assumption about the role of the church court is never really stated of course, but is widely held nevertheless. Thus when a man comes before us accused of sin the court often unknowingly assumes to itself the responsibility of purging him of his "*heart sins*" so he can be truly restored.

However, this assumption is ungodly and unbiblical. Courts can only convict men of violations of God's moral law, and there

must be two witnesses to confirm every fact. Therefore it is simply impossible to convict men of “*heart sins*” because no man can witness the heart. We can convict a man of ungodly speech, or ungodly actions, but we cannot convict him of ungodly motivations or an ungodly heart.

Yet, this is exactly what some courts do. They are convinced that “*Mr. D*” has some sort of ungodly heart attitude and assume that their job as a court is to bring about repentance. They then interpret everything he says, or is said about him in light of their presupposition that he is in sin.

It is not unlike the poor man who was wrongly committed to an asylum; the more vigorously he proclaimed his sanity, the more the psychologists were convinced he was insane! Their assumption is that he cannot get better **until** he admits he is sick! So if he protests his confinement, then clearly he is out of control. If he sits there and does not react, then clearly, he is sullen and depressed; more evidence of his insanity. If he calmly reasons with the doctors, he is in denial. No matter what he does, or how he does it, nothing can ever prove his sanity because everything is interpreted in light of the already reached conclusion that he is insane!

The role of a court is to establish, beyond reasonable doubt, that a violation of God's moral law has occurred and that the violator is unrepentant. That's it, pure and simple. The court is not the Holy Spirit and has no ability to read a man's heart or judge his motivation; all it can do is establish whether or not a sin was committed and if the sinner refuses to repent.

Therefore the court's role is to determine if the evidence supports the accusation that a violation of God's moral law occurred (and the accused is unrepentant). Nothing else ought to be considered. Granted, there are times when brothers might come to the side of a person (or group) to offer counsel, give advice, help resolve a dispute, etc., wherein there are no specific accusations of sin; but that is a different topic for a different study. Here it is

important for us to remember our guiding presupposition is as simple and straightforward as whether or not an accusation deals with an actual violation of the Moral Law, and that there is sufficient evidence to prove that such a violation has taken place.

Amazingly some elders entrusted with the moral authority of the courts of the church do not understand that their presuppositions are supposed to be governed by their constitutional documents and doctrinal confessions. Rather than having an objective basis for making a decision, they are dependent upon a subjective impression of their private interpretation of Scripture and whether they like the accused or not. If they like the man, then they can always find mitigating excuses to justify his actions regardless of whether there is doctrinal deviation or ethical lapses. However, if they do not like the man, they can find him guilty of an offense, even when there is no evidence to support the accusations against him. There are too many cases on the books of men who were in clear doctrinal violation of the Church's confession, but the responsible court **refused** to try, let alone convict the offender, because "*Mr. D is a nice guy.*" And there are other convictions that took place for no better reason than "*Mr. F is a trouble-maker.*"

While the above may well be more of an ethical lapse, than a failure in critical thinking skills, as we noted earlier in this chapter, a common presupposition amongst many elders is that if they are sincere in their convictions, then they are blameless in their judgments. In all the cases of a wrongful conviction that could not stand the test of objective analysis, there **had** to be good men who voted badly for that conviction to occur. These men somehow became sincerely convinced that the conviction was warranted, despite the fact that the evidence did not support the verdict! How do such things happen?

Allow me to suggest that many Christians do not seem able to look past their own subjective impression of a situation to determine whether the evidence actually supports the conclusion.

Instead, for all the reasons noted above, they become convinced of something, are sincere in that they truly want to do the right thing, and then take the logical actions; actions that too many times destroy reputations and ministries, split churches and bring the Gospel into disrepute.

The Limits of Reason and How We Are Misled

In our opening illustration, we saw how intelligent, well-educated men with sterling reputations accepted the most outrageous conclusions without any reasonable evidence. They are not alone in their problem. There is a recurring phenomenon, well documented in research journals, that demonstrates how people tend to believe certain things that can be shown to be false. This phenomenon crosses ethnic, social and educational lines; no one seems to be immune. Secular courts, originally significantly influenced by Christian presuppositions, acknowledge this fact and have over the centuries created procedures to deal with it. For example, the police investigate a crime, the district attorney prosecutes it, the jury (if needed) determines the facts of a case and the judge applies the law to the facts. All of these safeguards are intended to prevent if possible, any one person believing something false to have final authority in determining a person's guilt.

But the problem of people willingly believing false things in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary will simply not go away. Men are not computers and as we have seen logic and reason often take second place to other factors. For example, for years I have had running arguments with many people, including otherwise well-educated professionals, about whether cutting hair has any effect on its rate of growth. Whenever the subject comes up in a group, there are always one or two people who insist that if, say, a boy starts shaving at 12, his beard will grow faster and thicker than if he waited until he was 18 or 19. They will often cite personal anecdotes as “proof” of their assertion.

Now, when I was younger and more combative, I would try to reason people out of this strongly held but irrational belief. I would show them from text-books that hair is dead material and that therefore cutting off the end can have no effect on the follicles that actually cause growth. I would try to show them that it might **appear** that a beard (or hair on the legs, etc.) is “*thicker*” because the angle of the cut makes the ends of the individual hairs sharper; hence they feel “*thicker.*” But there are always a number of people who will not budge; they **know** what they know, and no evidence to the contrary will shift them.

Clearly some people are more susceptible to misinformation than others; let us be honest, some people are brighter or more logical than others and of course some people are just more stubborn and closed-minded. And yes, there are all those other factors we have already examined such as gullibility, suggestibility, prejudice and bias. Yet all of us are susceptible to holding questionable beliefs that cannot be explained by stupidity, ignorance or gullibility. Even well-informed, well-educated people who are successful in their areas of expertise can believe things that can be **proven** to be false. The question is, why?

We might try to answer by saying that some people can believe irrational things because it fits or satisfies some important psychological need within them; eg. some trauma suffered by someone might result in him being less than rational on the subject. For example, I have known veterans of WWII who, having been imprisoned by the Japanese, still hate everything about them passionately to this day. Because of what they experienced we might sympathize with their irrationality about Japanese cars, even if we politely and discreetly point out the illogic of their position. However, the phenomenon we are discussing here is how people will believe things that can be shown to be untrue - even when they have no stake in the outcome one way or the other.

This psychological dynamic of being convinced of something, regardless of whether the evidence supports the conclusion, is just

as common within the Church as it is outside. Furthermore, it has a direct effect on elders evaluating evidence in an ecclesiastical trial, since one implication is that some elders may be willing to accept evidence as valid and “*true*” even though there is no rational basis for doing so. All the elder knows is that the evidence “*seems*” convincing to him and therefore, following his conviction, he renders a judgment. But if he has fallen victim to this phenomenon, then the conviction will not find favor with God and the reputation of the court will be thrown into question. Recognizing and understanding this phenomenon might well help us take that important second look at why we have arrived at the conclusions we reached, and whether those conclusions are actually warranted; hence helping to ensure that we do not wrongfully convict others or let the guilty go free.

According to the scholars who have researched this phenomenon, it can be shown that the average person often arrives at erroneous conclusions (conclusions that can be demonstrated to be false because there is good and reliable evidence that contradicts the belief) because the conclusions seem to be the most sensible and consistent with their life experience. Their wrong conclusions are products not of irrationality, but of flawed rationality.

Let us see if we can explore this for a bit; unlike a book or movie, where the reader or viewer has a god-like omniscience about the plot, the motivations of the characters, etc., the real world does not usually provide us with clear, unambiguous “*facts*” with which we can reason and make good decisions. Instead, we are confronted with rather messy data that are random, incomplete, unrepresentative, ambiguous, inconsistent, unpalatable, and second hand. Furthermore, in the psychology of learning (see Appendix), all of us develop paradigms of how we think the world works by which we then interpret all the data that comes in. However, if our paradigm is wrong, then the conclusions we reach will also be wrong. We will over-value some evidence, and

undervalue other evidence. We will give unequal weight to that which confirms our paradigms and ignore that which would force us to change them.

Thus in our flawed attempts to cope with all of the complex data we must evaluate, we can arrive at a conclusion that **seems** logical and consistent, despite that conclusion being contrary to the facts. But then because of our own stubborn human pride, we might not be willing to back down from this erroneous conclusion.

Again the opening illustration helps to point this out: why do some otherwise sensible people simply accept outrageous claims? For some their life experience has been that they distrust the government, the large corporations, the present medical establishment, etc., and are therefore willing to believe a lie, because it actually fits within their frame of reference. Since they already assume that all these organizations are anti-Christian, then logically, they expect to see them **act** in an anti-Christian way. Thus when some outrageous claim comes before them, one of the reasons why they so quickly accept it is because that is exactly what they would expect given their basic paradigm.

There are a number of ways that this “*flawed rationality*” manifests in our thinking; for example, there is the tendency to “*make something out of nothing.*” We are psychologically predisposed to see order, pattern, and meaning in the world and we tend to find randomness, chaos and meaninglessness most unsatisfying. Thus there is a tendency to find meaningful patterns or relationships between various events, when in reality; there may only be randomness.

Now granted, from a Christian perspective, there is no real “*randomness*” because a sovereign God is working His will out through His providence. But as limited human beings it is simply presumptuous for us to think we can always understand **why** God does whatever He does. If a volcano erupts and kills people, is this a specific judgment of God on a particularly wicked people? If so, then why does God not destroy San Francisco? Both Job and Jesus

were highly scathing of those who tried to interpret God's providential acts in such simplistic terms. In God's mind, there may well be a relationship between a certain person's actions, and some sort of action of His in time; but in order for us to determine that relationship, we would have to **be** God.

But we still want to find patterns or meanings in what, to us can only appear as random events. For example have you ever lain on your back on a warm summer day and watched the clouds drift by? Did you ever see actual images in the clouds? Don't worry; you are normal if you did; we all have a tendency to impute order to ambiguous stimuli and thus sometimes can detect coherence where it does not exist. Researchers have shown that subjects given a random pattern of dots will “*discover*” a pattern eventually; even when mathematically, the dots are completely randomized.

There are many different examples of this phenomenon of finding relationships between discordant events that in so far as we can know, have no relationship with one another. For example, there is the *clustering illusion*; if random events appear to have too many *clusters* or *streaks of consecutive outcomes* of the same type, we have difficulty accepting them as being actually random. We assume that there **must** be a pattern and even though we might **know** that the events are unconnected, we still tend to assume that there must be **some** relationship. Furthermore this tendency is not eliminated by repeated examination. An example that illustrates this comes from one of the textbooks we use in the Critical Thinking course. The Gateway Arch in St. Louis is one of the world's largest optical illusions because it appears to be much taller than it is wide, even though its height and the width of its base are equal. No matter how many times you look at it, the illusion is complete, **until** you actually measure it.

While the Arch is an optical illusion, it does illustrate that our perception of something can be completely contrary to the reality of something; and this applies directly to how we interpret life events. We can attribute patterns of cause and effect relationships

to isolated, random events simply because they have clustered together. For example, flipping a coin has a 50-50 chance of coming up heads or tails. But it is not unusual to have a “run” where the coin will come up “heads” five or six times in a row. Of course, over the long term, things **will** even out; but if a person claiming to have ESP got lucky in a run, he could claim that this was a demonstration of his “powers.” And because we would not intuitively expect such a clustering, some people might be convinced!

Now, what does all of this, no matter how fascinating it may be, have to do with evaluating evidence in an ecclesiastical trial? Well, here is the problem; when a court has to determine a person's guilt or innocence, they have to make sense out of all sorts of data that comes before them. Accusations are made, statements are given, witnesses give testimony, etc. Since we are psychologically predisposed to try to make sense out of random events, it is natural for the elders entrusted to adjudicate this problem to try and somehow fit all this data together. The problem is that if the elders do not understand this phenomenon of “*making something out of nothing*” they might well find a pattern, or some over-arching meaning to all the data brought before them; a pattern that does not really exist. They can make connections between statements and behaviours that actually are totally unrelated. But by making these connections, they end up coming to completely false conclusions.

For example; say a church has over the last few months lost several members. Then some people in the church become disgruntled with the elders and state that their policies are driving people away. The elders do not think so, so the grumblers file charges against the elders for pastoral incompetence and professional malfeasance. The church finances begin to fall badly behind budget, a lot of people are getting upset and now, even more people are leaving. The charges contain all sorts of “*evidence*” putting the elders in a bad light, clearly showing a “*pattern*” of

uncaring, unloving leadership.

Now, the “*something out of nothing*” phenomenon begins to work. To the eyes of the one making the accusation, he has detected a pattern that **proves** his accusations are correct and he is firmly and sincerely convinced in his own mind that his charges are not only accurate, but require the higher court to act.

If this case came before some ecclesiastical court, and was adjudicated, even if all the other problems we have discussed did not occur, the judges at best have a twisted mess to unravel. And if they are not careful, then they **could** decide that the elders were guilty of some horrible mismanagement; after all, it's all down there in black and white.

However, does the evidence actually sustain the charges? Is there necessarily a relationship that can be proven that the actions of the elders **here** caused this effect (i.e., people leaving) over **there**?

First of all, let's look at this from a Presbyterian perspective (which of course is the church I am most familiar with). This case ought never to be the subject of charges in the first place; Presbyteries have no authority over a local session to tell them how to perform their duties. If the elders commit some sin, then of course the Presbytery may be called in; but that is different from second-guessing their judgment. A Presbytery might well disapprove of how a session governs a local church, but they have no authority to take any action **unless** there is clear evidence that there is sin. Most church members, even elders do not understand this. They assume that the higher courts are hierarchical in nature; sort of like if you don't like Mom's answer to your question, then go to Dad. Even Presbyteries have been known to over-step the lawful limits of their own authority in this regard.

Now, when there is an accusation of sin against a session, then of course the Presbytery does have lawful authority to investigate and act. However, as they investigate, they must ask themselves whether there is necessarily a cause and effect relationship

between the incidents cited in the charges? Did people leave the church because they were oppressed by the elders, hated the pastor's sermons, were "*fed up*" with the leadership or is there some other cause?

Amazingly enough, there are cases on the books wherein the judges were perfectly willing to accept such charges as true, **even** when clear evidence was presented that the reason why certain people left a church was due to job transfer or doctrinal differences or even that the complainers were calling people on the phone, and driving them away! This again is sad, but in some strange sense also hilarious because it illustrates this basic irrationality; the reason **why** some people left the church was because disgruntled people were calling them on the phone, trying to enlist their aid in censuring the elders. Not wanting to get involved in such problems, the people simply decided to leave. The disgruntled people then turned around and argued that these people leaving **prove** that the elders were in sin, driving people away!

This tendency to find "*patterns*" also lends itself to trying to assign motives to actions. We want to understand not only what happened, but **why** it happened; and therefore, in an attempt to make sense out of another person's actions, we will tend to try and find a motive that fits within what we know, or think we know about the accused's personality, lifestyle, temperament, etc. However, once we go down this road, we have left the road of evidence and trespassed into God's realm; for only He can read the heart. Let us be honest: often, when we look at some word we said, or action we took, we do not always know **why** we said what we said; or even why we did what we did. How realistically then can we accurately impute motives to someone else?

Yet that is exactly what some church courts do when evaluating evidence. They assume that by looking at various bits of evidence they can come to the "*truth*" of a matter, and determine whether or not a man was in sin because they think they have found a "*pattern*" that reveals his motivations and intent.

Of course, if a man has a “*pattern*” of beating his wife, getting drunk, committing adultery, defrauding his customers, etc., then this is a different matter. The pattern here is “*genuine*” because the individual has been sinning in a specific way that can be clearly identified: “*Mr. Y was drunk on this date and this date and this date which can be verified by this witness, that citation for DUI...*” But the kind of “*patterns*” we are discussing here are creating relationships between discordant, unrelated events; for example, a ruling elder falling off a ladder while painting his house then determines that God must be judging him and the church for some sin. He then looks at every bad thing that has happened over the past six months and concludes that the entire church is under God's judgment. Worse yet, even though the above reasoning is totally contradictory to Reformed theology and polity, it actually becomes the substance for Presbytery to charge the session with sin! There is simply no objective, Biblical way to determine if a specific event (falling off a ladder) was caused by a specific cause (the session did something with which the elder disagreed). The **only** way to make that sort of connection would be if God gave some sort of special revelation; a type of revelation that Reformed Christians deny occurs today.

The point is that rather than trying to “*make sense*” out of the whole situation which leads to finding patterns where none exist, instead, the goal ought to be to determine if an actual sin was committed. Unlike a “*pattern*,” a specific sin is fairly easily defined; was God's moral law violated or not? If so, then when and where that violation occurred ought to be established i.e., “*on this day, this person, said, did, whatever... which is a violation of this specific commandment.*” If not, then the court has no authority to act, pure and simple.

Once we suspect that a phenomenon exists, research shows that we generally have little trouble explaining **why** it exists or what it means. This is a built-in ability or tendency for humans to explain, find coherence between disparate events, and justify

diverse outcomes, characteristics and causes. Once a person has misidentified a random pattern as a “*real*” phenomenon, it will no longer exist as a random, puzzling, isolated fact about the world. Rather, it is quickly explained and readily integrated into the person's pre-existing theories and beliefs. People then will cling tenaciously to their beliefs even in the face of hostile evidence.

So if the court is biased, or hears only one side of the story, or detects a pattern that does not really exist, everything else is then interpreted in light of this pattern. Evidence which supports the belief is accepted, and evidence that would contradict this basic belief is ignored.

Misinterpretation of Incomplete and Unrepresentative Data

Or, how we get too much from too little;

If a phenomenon exists, there must be some positive evidence of its existence. But it should be clear that just because evidence may suggest that something **could** be true, does not mean that it necessarily **is** true. Yet there is a tendency for people to find evidence that **confirms** their beliefs because it is easier to understand and assimilate such data within an existing paradigm than develop a new one. This is an important point and cannot be overemphasized; people tend to find evidence which supports their belief that something occurred regardless of whether the evidence is actually valid or not. For example, say “*Mr. H is a mean man.*” The belief may have originated in any number of ways from personal malice, to an interpersonal conflict, to different expectations, social customs, whatever. However, once someone has that belief, the tendency will then be to find “*evidence*” which supports that belief and ignore or disregard anything that would disprove it. Every time Mr. H grimaces is “*proof*” that he is mean. If he raises his voice to correct an unruly child, then clearly this “*proves*” what we have believed about him all along.

People can also be misled about reality by placing too much

emphasis on positive instances, occasionally “*detecting*” relationships that are not there. For example, have you ever thought or said, “*You are sure to need something the moment you throw it away!*” This seems to be a true expression of reality because we all remember times when we threw something away that had been cluttering up a closet or garage for a long time, only to find a few days or weeks later that we ended up needing that very thing.

However, the “*reality*” is that we tend to pay attention to those times when we **did** need something after we threw it away, and forget all the times when we threw something away and never needed it again. This is called “*selective attention*” in that we “*attend*” or “*remember*” data that confirms our beliefs and neglect data that does not.

Furthermore, we tend to seek out information that would potentially confirm a belief over information that might contradict it. This again is an example of “*selective attention*” and does not necessarily come from any conscious desire for the hypothesis to be true, but rather because we tend to select data that confirms our starting point.

Why do people do this? The standard explanation is that such behaviour is cognitively easier. Every day we are bombarded with thousands of bits of data and somehow we must work through all that data to make decisions. Selective attention is just easier because any change in our thinking takes work. Thus our memories tend to select evidence that confirms our belief and overlook evidence that would disprove it. The basic principle is that **we tend to engage in a search for evidence that is biased towards confirmation.**

Furthermore often we can arrive at erroneous conclusions about the nature of reality, because there is crucial data that is unavailable to us, and because of the positions we have in life, the opportunities we are given or even the people with whom we associate. We simply do not get a complete picture. There is an amusing anecdote about a liberal Democrat from Berkeley

complaining about the outcome of the 1980 election crying “*How could Reagan win? Nobody I know voted for him!*”

Finally, there is what is known as *Seeing what we expect to see; Bias Evaluation of Ambiguous and Inconsistent Data*. People are inclined to see what they expect to see, and conclude what they expect to conclude. Therefore, information that is consistent with our pre-existing beliefs is often accepted at face value, whereas evidence that contradicts those beliefs is critically scrutinized and discounted.

Now, taking all these psychological dynamics together, do you see why it is **so** important that when a case comes before an ecclesiastical court that the procedures are carefully followed and the investigative and judicial functions clearly distinguished? Once a court has made a prejudgment about the merits of a case, then psychologically speaking, they are very likely to interpret everything else that comes before them in such a way as to confirm their original beliefs. They will attune to data that confirms their beliefs, and ignore or undervalue data that would require them to change their opinion.

So if the court has confused its function, conducted its investigation, prosecuted the offense because they already have determined that the accused is guilty, how will they **ever** find a man innocent? Everything we know about how people form convictions screams that once a person's mind is made up, he will tend to find evidence that supports his beliefs, and ignore everything else. But if a court does not understand these dynamics, if their only concern is that their judgment is “*sincere*” then innocent men falsely accused will **never** receive a “*fair*” hearing. Cases will never go to trial unless the court already believes the man guilty, and if he is already determined to be guilty, then nothing can ever prove his innocence!

Rules of Evidence: How to Evaluate the Evidence

In my critical thinking course, we emphasize that a good argument that can be used as proof of an assertion has three basic

criteria (1) warranted assumptions, (2) relevant and sufficient support, and (3) does not omit relevant evidence. These criteria form the basis of good critical thinking skills and therefore provide an excellent basis for determining whether or not evidence used in a trial actually proves what it is supposed to prove. Therefore, when a case comes before a church court, every elder ought to have these three criteria in the back of his mind as he evaluates the evidence that comes before him. We will assume here of course that the process itself has not been compromised; that the court has carefully separated its investigative function from its judicial one. We will assume that the judges have not discussed the merits of the case, or formed preconceived ideas about guilt or innocence and have waited for both sides to present their arguments **before** they arrive at a conclusion.

Now they have a mass of testimony, documents and evidence before them that they must evaluate. The first step is to determine if the evidence is based on *clear and accurate* (i.e., warranted) *assumptions*. An assumption is a claim granted by others. A *warranted* assumption is one that is either known to be true or which is reasonable to accept without requiring an argument to support it. For example, we ought not to have to argue about whether the church's doctrinal standards are accurate or not; going into the trial everyone ought to assume that since we have an agreed-on Confession, those standards determine orthodoxy. If for example a man is charged with heresy in our church, both prosecution and defence can assume that the Westminster Standards are the basis by which the doctrines in question will be evaluated. The prosecution has to show where the man's doctrine is in conflict with the Confession, while the defence must demonstrate that the doctrine in question is in agreement (or at least consistent) with the Confession.

Clearly, how one defines a "*warranted*" assumption is based ultimately on one's worldview; i.e., what one believes about the ultimate nature of reality. Nobody reasons from a blank slate,

everyone has assumptions that they accept as foundational (axiomatic) and then reasons from those assumptions. Thus often the key to evaluating conflicting claims is to analyse the assumptions being made by both sides to determine if, in fact, they really are warranted. An accuser may consistently argue from his assumptions that the accused is in sin; **but if his assumption is wrong, then his conclusion is in error.**

There is a problem in many evangelical Presbyterian churches in that there is a widespread assumption that the Confession is not really binding on the individual, even though every elder takes a solemn vow before God that they sincerely receive and accept these standards as their doctrinal foundation. Yes, I know this appears schizophrenic, but conflicts often break out between Reformed Christians because, at heart, one side accepts the official doctrinal standards of the church, while the other side insists that their private interpretation of the Bible takes precedence. If the court itself is divided on this issue, it is unlikely that justice will be had by either side. A confused worldview leaves everyone frustrated and unsatisfied because there is no objective means to settle a dispute between people.

Thus there is often much frustration, debate and animosity in some denominations, because in reality there are two competing understandings of what constitutes orthodoxy and, by implication, what makes something a heresy. Some elders believe that the Confession is to bind men's consciences and others do not. Hence men are often at odds during a trial because there are two different assumptions about what constitutes the standard by which things are to be judged.

Secondly, evidence must be evaluated by whether it provides *relevant* and *sufficient support* for its conclusions. A conclusion based on insufficient evidence is called a "*hasty conclusion*" or "*rush to judgment.*" The Proverbs warn that the first to plead his case seems just until it is examined by another (Pvbs 18:17, 25:8, etc.). Since this is a Biblical observation, we are therefore **required** to suspend

judgment on any issue until both sides of the story are presented and the evidence is evaluated. Yet if a judge in a church trial does not understand this, if he allows himself to be influenced to reach a conclusion before he has heard both sides, he is violating a Biblical principle and his verdict will be unjust.

Granted, there is a degree of subjectivity here because there really is no absolute definition of what constitutes “*relevant and sufficient*” evidence. Even the civil courts, responsible for people's lives can only come up with the concept of “*reasonable doubt*.” But we can borrow a mechanism from formal logic to see if the conclusion that is being urged on the court flows logically from the premises of the evidence. Elders are not usually trained in formal logic but surely, when evaluating evidence, the least we can do is try to see if the conclusions actually follow from the evidence presented? Furthermore, a study of logical fallacies ought to be a goal of everyone who must render a decision affecting a man's life and reputation. Some conclusions that **seem** “*reasonable*” are in fact “*non sequiturs*” or “*that which does not follow*” from the evidence presented. Yet all too often in ecclesiastical trials a verdict can be shown to be inconsistent with the evidence used, because a basic logical fallacy was used.

In one case where I was called in as an outside counsel for the defense, the court had determined that a man was guilty of sin. When I asked the court **how** they had arrived at their decision, they responded that the proof of their assertion was that the court had decided he was in sin! This is so wrong on so many levels I do not know where to begin! At best this is circular reasoning; assuming what you are supposed to prove. **This is not justice but judicial tyranny where the authority believes it has the right to come to any conclusion it wants to, for any reasons it wants, just because it has the power to do so!**

Furthermore, there needs to be a degree of humility amongst the judges when they are reaching a conclusion; i.e., a conclusion should be asserted with a degree of certainty proportionate to the

evidence presented in the premises. A basic premise for sound argumentation is that a claim for a strong conclusion, **demand**s strong evidence to support it. **If the evidence is weak, then the conclusion ought to be weak.** Therefore, even if one suspects in one's heart that a man **may** be guilty, a court cannot convict unless the evidence is strong. This is where civil trials require the idea of "*reasonable doubt*." When a church court speaks rightly, it speaks with genuine authority from God. But there are curses associated with speaking, when God has not. **To declare a person guilty when the evidence cannot support that guilt is, in effect, to give a false prophecy and bring God's wrath on the court** (e.g., Jer 23:1, 29:23, Ezk 13:3, Isa 5:20, 21, etc.).

Finally, when making a determination of guilt or innocence, **one must ensure that relevant evidence is not omitted.** Ecclesiastical courts differ significantly from the adversarial system of the present civil system in one basic way; in a modern civil trial, all that is important is winning; truth does not enter into the picture. While we like to think that our civil courts give justice, there are too many examples of men being wrongfully convicted because the prosecution made a case that the defense did not adequately challenge. Sometimes important evidence that would have freed the accused is illegally suppressed. In the same way, we all know of instances where guilty men went free because of some legal technicality, or the defense was able to manipulate the jury.

But in church courts both sides ought to be concerned primarily with the truth. **Regardless of whether a man wins his case he will eventually stand before a holy God who will judge both his actions and his heart.** Therefore both the prosecution and the defense need to be careful that they do not try to build their case by omitting relevant evidence. Just because something might weaken the prosecutor's case is no reason to ignore it because he wants to win. In the same way, the defense must make sure that he is not trying to win to save himself from the embarrassment of repentance; **no matter what the court decides, God as the**

ultimate judge WILL eventually render a verdict.

The court however must keep in mind the doctrine of human depravity, and therefore must be proactive in carefully weighing what comes before it. Has one side or the other omitted something important? Do the arguments actually support the conclusions?

Perhaps one way of looking at the entire process is that the arguments and evidence presented to the court can be seen as a building, with the conclusion being the roof, and the arguments (or evidence) being the pillars supporting the roof. The court can ask itself “*Do the pillars actually support the roof?*” In other words, in any testimony or evidence presented, **does the desired conclusion logically follow from what has been presented?**

Now, while this principle applies to both the prosecution as well as the defence, remember **the burden of proof always remains with the person making the accusation.** If Mr. A is accusing Mr. B of sin, then the burden of proof always lies with Mr. A. Mr. B does not have to prove his innocence, but Mr. A does have to prove Mr. B's guilt. This is a basic premise of all argumentation and reason yet I am amazed at how many elders do not understand this and actually seem to assume that if a charge is made against someone, then the accused has to **prove** his innocence!

But the reverse is the case in all logical argumentation; if the person making the affirmative case (i.e., “*Mr. B is guilty of sin*”) cannot substantiate his case, then he automatically loses. This has been the universally agreed upon procedure since the time of the ancient Greeks, taught in every elementary debate class, and is the foundation of all civil litigation.

Going back to our building illustration, not only does the court have to determine whether the evidence actually supports the conclusion (i.e., that Mr. B is in sin), but they have to ask themselves, “*How solid is the evidence?*” If a pillar is hollow, or made out of cardboard and paper-mâché, then the supports will appear stronger than they really are. Relevant evidence is that which is essential and actually supports the conclusion. Irrelevant evidence

is that which might look powerful and convincing, but really has no substance.

An example of irrelevant evidence might be the personality of the accused. Some people are more likeable than others, more winsome and friendly in demeanor. This is not an issue of character but of temperament. For a court to convict a man of sin when the only evidence offered is essentially, "*I don't like this man*" is unjust to say the least. To convict him because he took an orthodox but unpopular theological stand or because he doesn't quite fit in with the church or presbytery is outrageous. Yet, if one examines the cases recorded at various General Assemblies and talks to the witnesses, sometimes the reasons for conviction had less to do with evidence of someone committing a sin as much as personal animosity. Men have been found guilty of sin because, during the trial, the judges did not like the looks that crossed his face!

Getting back on track, since the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked, there is always the tendency on both sides to want to make their point, and because of all the psychological dynamics we examined earlier, both sides may be blind to that which would undermine their case. The court does not have to call the motives or sincerity of either side into question, but **they should not assume that someone is necessarily giving all the evidence**. As we have seen, there is a perfectly natural tendency to attend to those facts that support his own position and disregard those which might undermine it. This means that the court must be sceptical of accepting something as "*proven*" until they have heard both sides of the story and can evaluate whether the prosecution has made its case.

Obviously, godly men will try to include **all** the relevant information, even if it goes against their position. But the court is entrusted with the responsibility of using sound reasoning to evaluate whether or not the case has been made. Sincere men can and do often make ghastly mistakes in reasoning. The court, by

maintaining its objectivity and examining carefully the facts before it, is a safeguard for justice.

Sadly, there are no simple solutions to the problems here but a great start can be made if elders entrusted with adjudicating a trial understand that their personal convictions, no matter how sincere or strongly held, do not constitute, in and of itself, sufficient evidence of guilt. If a sin has been committed and has not been repented of, then the prosecution ought to be able to demonstrate it clearly and unambiguously. The court does not have to be omniscient - just fair and impartial, to weigh the evidence and reach a just verdict.

Conclusion

Since all men are imperfect, there is no perfect justice this side of eternity. Even sincere men, trying their best, will sometimes make mistakes in reasoning that lead to injustice and wrongful convictions. But surely, as those called by God to judge angels, the Christian church needs to do everything it can to ensure that whatever judicial decisions they make are based on sound Biblical principles.

Discipline is a fundamental and essential mark of a true church; if we fail here, then it destroys our ability to minister the Gospel to the world in the name of King Jesus. By carefully analysing **how** ecclesiastical courts **ought** to arrive at decisions, we will help to maintain the integrity of Christ's church as well as bring sinners to repentance. Our God is the true God, and those who worship Him must do so in spirit **and** truth. May God grant us judges who love the truth and will settle for nothing less...

How to Conduct an Investigation and Trial

And the judges shall make careful inquiry and indeed; if the witness is a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother, then you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother; so you shall put away the evil from among you.

Deuteronomy 19:18-19

Most Christians are unaccustomed to dealing with judicial proceedings and the average elder is unfamiliar with the process. Therefore, ecclesiastical courts frequently do not separate the functions of investigation, prosecution and judgment as the secular courts do. As mentioned in a previous chapter, in some churches the same group that investigates an accusation to determine if there is sufficient evidence to warrant a trial, then constitute the very same court that sits in judgment on the accused! This makes about as much sense as the policeman who arrests a suspect, prosecuting him, and judging him!

Church courts **must** then (in light of the above tendency to interpret all evidence in light of its preconceptions) clearly differentiate between these functions if justice is to be maintained. For example, say that a church has four elders and an accusation comes to them about “*Mr. M.*”

First, the elders have to determine if they will receive the accusation; which means (1) determining whether there was an actual sin that *could* have been committed and (2) has the accuser followed Matthew 18:15ff? The elders at this point may not discuss the **merits** of the case, their personal like or dislike of the individuals involved or anything other than these two basic

factors.

The reason is obvious; sometimes people accuse others of sin, when that person said or did something that they personally found offensive. But an offense is not necessarily a sin; just because we may not like a person, does not entitle us to take judicial action against him. Furthermore, if an accuser has not followed the provisions of Matthew 18:15 then the elders would be in sin for listening to gossip!

If neither one of these two primary conditions are met, the accusation may not be received and the accuser needs to be told why. It is possible that there is an unresolved conflict between the two individuals that can be worked out with pastoral ministry by the elders; but they do not try this case and they must not receive any evidence about it, one way or the other, from any of the people involved, either personally or corporately.

However, say that the first two conditions have been met; the accusation is an actual sin, and the person has followed Matthew 18:ff. Now there are only four people to serve as a possible court and they must decide how to proceed with investigating and, if necessary, prosecuting an offense without becoming prejudiced one way or the other. Remember, all they have is an accusation right now.

The first step is an investigation to determine whether or not there is reason to conduct a trial. This investigation begins by bringing **both** people together, without the elders talking either personally or corporately with either person, to give the accuser the opportunity to make his allegations in the presence of the accused, and giving the accused the opportunity to answer the charges.

This is not yet a trial. It could be that at this point the accused can give a “*satisfactory explanation of his behaviour*” and the whole issue can be resolved right then and there. It only proceeds to a trial if his explanation is **not** satisfactory. The elders do **not** begin to gather evidence or form a judgment about the guilt or innocence of

the accused other than to give both parties an opportunity to state their case.

If the explanation of a man's behaviour is unsatisfactory, and there is good reason to suspect that a violation of God's moral law has occurred, **then** it can proceed to a trial. This is the tricky part: how does a court determine that a violation of God's law **may** have taken place, without prejudicing themselves in evaluating whether it **actually** took place? Here is where most courts fall down.

I would argue that at this point all that the court has to do is decide that there is a discrepancy between the two main parties; the accuser and the accused. The accuser maintains that the accused is in sin, the accused insists he is not. Nothing has to be proven here other than that an accusation has been made and the accusation is "*credible*." If the accused insists on his innocence, then a trial date should be set when all the evidence can be considered.

I do not think the PCA is as well served by its BCO as it could be here, in that the BCO uses the language "*a strong presumption of guilt*" to determine whether a trial ought to take place. The problem with the wording is that it can give some elders the idea that the case essentially has to be made **before** a trial even occurs. I think that what the BCO intends to mean is that there is reasonable, credible evidence before the court; e.g., the accusation is of an actual sin, the accuser is credible, etc.

If this is **not** the intention of the BCO then there is a fundamental flaw in the PCA's whole concept of a trial: if the accused must be considered guilty **before** a trial takes place, then the only purpose of a trial is to make public what the court has already decided without a trial. This then would make nonsense of the whole process of examining witnesses, comparing testimony, etc.

It is probably helpful here to use the terminology of the secular law courts. There is a difference between a "*trial*" and a "*hearing*." A trial has to do with determining facts, a "*hearing*" has to do with

applying the law to the facts. If the facts are not in doubt, (for example, the accused admits the facts) then a hearing takes place where the law is applied. However, if the accused counters the “*facts*” then a trial takes place so that the facts can be determined.

Therefore in a church trial the purpose is for both sides to present their case before an impartial tribunal, who will render a decision based on all the evidence to determine the facts of the case. However, if the BCO's phrase “*strong presumption of guilt*” means that the court must be convinced that the accused is already guilty before a trial takes place, then the trial becomes simply an empty formality. How could they determine the facts without a trial?

Instead, the best way to understand this phrase is in light of the usage in the civil courts where, before a prosecution takes place, the district attorney must believe there is evidence that (1) a violation of the law took place and (2) the accused could have committed that violation. He first gets an indictment from the Grand Jury who conducts an investigation to see whether that evidence is sufficient to warrant a trial. Then, during the trial, the DA makes his case before the judge and jury who determine whether the “*facts*” support his accusations. Thus the “*strong presumption of guilt*” is really an accuser convincing the court that there is sufficient evidence to warrant a trial. **All of this is done to protect the innocent from false accusations and the tyranny of the State. Therefore if even secular courts respect the rights of the individual, how much more ought ecclesiastical courts strive to be diligent and ensure that the functions of investigation and adjudication are carefully distinguished?**

Getting back to our example: once it is determined that a trial is in order the elders may appoint one of its members, or the original accuser may prosecute the offense. But if the prosecutor is also a member of the court logically he should not vote on the outcome and simple fairness means that he may not try to influence the

court simply because he is one of the elders.

The next step is that the prosecutor then develops his case, interviews the witnesses and at the appointed time presents his evidence to the court. During this time, if the prosecutor is one of the elders, he ought not to discuss the merits of the case with them **until** the trial actually occurs. This prevents bias, prejudice and all the other problems we have been discussing throughout this book.

During the trial, the prosecutor presents his arguments and the accused then has the opportunity to cross-examine the witnesses and make his defence. Throughout this process, the court **must** be careful to preserve their integrity by not being involved in the investigative process because otherwise they will have already reached a judgment **before** having heard all the evidence. And as the psychological dynamics above show, if they arrive at a conclusion **before** hearing all the evidence, then they will tend to interpret all evidence in light of their preconceived judgment.

Now if you will forgive a tangent for Presbyterians for a moment; when a case comes before a Presbytery, the procedures remain the same, but are actually easier because there are more men available to do the work. A committee from Presbytery can be assigned to investigate whether there are reasonable grounds to determine that an offence has been committed. If a committee so determines, then a judicial commission can be appointed to conduct a trial. Members of the investigation committee can be assigned to prosecute the case if desired, but again clearly, in the interests of justice and the psychological dynamics noted above, they ought not to be on the court that determines guilt; after all, the members of the committee, like a district attorney, already think the man **could** be guilty; so how impartial are they going to be if they have to actually decide his guilt?

Properly speaking, within Presbyterian polity there is a profound difference between a commission and a committee. A committee has the responsibility to investigate and report; a commission has the authority to conduct all business referred to it

by the relevant body. Therefore, commissions, by definition, ought **never** to conduct investigations which are the proper province of committees.

However, in talking with sessions and presbyteries on how they handle judicial process, few seem to follow the above guidelines. The most common practice is for the court (whether session or presbytery) to sit together and discuss the entire process from investigation to judgment. They will receive testimony from one side but not from the other, discuss the testimony, arrive at a judgment and **then** conduct a trial; a trial whose outcome has already been determined.

I have often wanted to ask such courts what they think the purpose of a trial is other than a mere formality to give the appearance of justice. As mentioned in a previous chapter this is “*justice*” the old Soviet way; find a man guilty behind closed doors and then conduct a show trial to justify the decision. How can any reasonable person not see that the same court that investigates a man is already predisposed to finding him guilty? Is not the whole purpose of a trial to give both sides an opportunity to state their case without the verdict already having been reached? Sadly, this plea has often fallen on deaf ears.

“How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?”

Psalm 82:2

The Proverbs on Gossip and the Sins of Speech

*An evildoer listens to wicked lips, A liar
pays attention to a destructive tongue.*

Proverbs 17:4

Introduction

There is a dirty little secret in evangelical Christianity; an obscene and disgusting practice so horrible that God specifically calls it an abomination – yet this sin is widely, almost universally present in even the most “*devout*” Christian churches. This “*secret*” sin destroys families, rips churches apart, devastates men's careers, and causes individuals the most hideous type of personal grief and pain.

Yet it goes on day after day, year after year; and if you ever dare to actually confront people to try and stop it, they will turn on you like mad dogs to destroy you. Oh, occasionally, pastors will give lip service to condemning this abhorrent sin; but pastors themselves are notoriously guilty of committing it.

That sin is ***gossip***. Gossip is equated in the New Testament with the worst sorts of reprobation; a sign of God giving wicked men over to complete depravity (Romans 1:28-32, 2 Tim 3:2-5) – yet the average “*Christian*” today routinely wallows in listening to, and passing on negative, derogatory information about other people. In “*fact*,” as we will discover, Scripture regards the sins of speech, (including gossip, slander and false witness) as **so** horrendous, that God essentially says that those who

unrepentantly commit them have wicked, unregenerate hearts.

So what then does that say about those who profess the Name of Christ, yet willingly, even gleefully gossip, slander and bear false witness about their brothers?

In this brief survey from the Book of Proverbs, we are going to try and answer that question. It is my assumption going into this study that this monstrous evil is being committed unwittingly, unthinkingly by otherwise sincere believers. I am hoping, with every fibre of my being, that a cultural value has subtly insinuated itself inside the Christian community (we'll talk about how that happens in a bit) and that if people only *knew* what God really thought about this monstrously evil sin, then they would immediately throw themselves on the floor weeping in repentance.

But as we will see as the study progresses, the prevalence of gossip, slander and false witness in the modern church may be due to something deeper and darker; something that we would rather not know. But I am hoping for something better; Dear Heavenly Father – I am **praying** for something better. For if I am wrong, then a significant number of the remnant of those today who claim the Name of Christ may in fact be in league with Hell...

God's Condemnation

Now those were some mighty strong words above, and very strong claims. “Sure,” you are saying, “*gossip and such is nasty and bad, but really, is it as bad as you are making it out?*” No my friend, from God's perspective **it is much worse.**

First, consider Proverbs 6:12-15 *“A worthless person, a wicked man, is the one who walks with a false mouth, who winks with his eyes, who signals with his feet, who points with his fingers; who with perversity in his heart devises evil continually, who spreads strife. Therefore his calamity will come suddenly; instantly he will be broken, and there will be no healing.”* God here says that the man who “walks with a false mouth” is worthless and wicked. What is that “false

mouth?” It is one that says one thing, when the person really means something different. It is a mouth that distorts or twists the truth for one's own purposes, one who tells “*tales*” about others, one that does not speak **all** the truth; but just those bits that serve the wicked man's purposes.

Furthermore, this kind of person “*spreads strife*” with his wicked, worthless words. Conflicts and confrontations will happen as long as there is even one person who is not yet perfected; and since perfection will not occur until the Resurrection and final Judgment, all people, including Christians are going to have “*strife*.” The issue is never whether there is strife or not, but rather, how we handle that strife.

A godly man resolves problems, but the ungodly man spreads it. As we will see, gossip is essentially a vector for spreading strife and conflict within a community, just as sneezing is a way of spreading a cold. But unlike a cold that one suffers with for a few days and then recovers, strife literally can destroy the entire community and is just as deadly as the bubonic plague that killed much of Europe in the Middle Ages. And God promises personally, that the person who spreads this horrible, infectious “*disease*” will suffer “*calamity*” and that he will be “*broken*.”

Secondly, think about Proverbs 6:16-19 “*There are six things which the Lord hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, a false witness who utters lies, and one who spreads strife among brothers.*” First note that here, God puts a “*lying tongue*” a “*false witness*” and “*one who spreads strife among brothers*” in the same class as murderers and other self-consciously wicked men. Clearly, He sees gossip and slander as being a bit more serious than we do. He specifically says that these are monstrous sins that bring up the strongest possible negative response from Him.

And just in case we missed it the first time He said it, God repeats the same thought in Proverbs 12:22 “*Lying lips are an*

abomination to the Lord, but those who deal faithfully are His delight."

In both passages, God calls these sins of speech "*abominations.*" An abomination is something so wrong, it is disgusting, reprehensible, repulsive; well you get the idea. Now if God says that He loathes something, we had all better pay very close attention. Gossip, slander and backbiting, etc., are not just peccadilloes in God's view, but sins so revolting that they metaphorically turn His stomach. How then, does such a revolting, disgusting practice become "*acceptable*" and normal within God's church?

Though it may be a bit of a tangent, perhaps it is appropriate to talk for a moment about how Christians develop both their core beliefs as well as their ultimate values. In my experience, most Christians sort of adopt their beliefs and values from those around them. In and of itself this is not necessarily bad or wrong, just so long as the people around us believe and value the right things. The Apostle Paul said; "*the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things and the God of peace shall be with you*" (Phil 4:9).

But on the other hand, he also warned us that (quoting a pagan proverb) "*Bad company corrupts good morals*" (1 Cor 15:33) as a warning against being influenced by ungodly people.

Now do you see the problem? If Christians develop their sense of what is right and wrong **only** by the standards of those around them, then when those social values are unbiblical, very quickly the entire church can adopt as "*normal*" that which is in reality utterly wicked. It is not the sincerity of the people that is at question; many Christians can be "*sincerely*" trying to live an ethical and moral lifestyle as they understand it. But because their primary source of what is right and wrong comes from their sub-culture, then if the sub-culture gets it wrong, they tend to just blindly follow. And though our Lord is gracious and compassionate, sincerity is no substitute for truth; just look at

how God judged Uzzah in 2 Samuel 6:3-8. David was having the Ark of the Covenant transported on a wagon when it began to slip off. Uzzah touched the Ark to keep it from falling; and God killed him for it. Uzzah was genuinely and sincerely trying to keep the Ark from being defiled; but that was no excuse for touching what God said was not to be touched – and he died for it.

You see, the real problem was that God had said that the Ark was to be carried by the priests on long poles; but David either didn't know this, or had forgotten it. None of the priests knew any better either; and so, they essentially set up a situation that cost Uzzah his life. There is no doubt that David, the priests and Uzzah were all “sincere” but they were not obeying God.

Thus in the same way, there may be many strategies we develop for dealing with conflicts, offenses, and interpersonal problems; some of us do not even think twice about the way we react to certain life-situations because “*everybody knows*” that **this** is the normal way we deal with such issues. But if “*everyone*” has forgotten, or ignores God's commandments about these situations, then we will make a mess of it, and He will judge us.

Now, lest anyone think that this instance was just “*Old Testament*” and irrelevant for us today, remember that the Corinthian church was judged by God for failing to resolve interpersonal problems appropriately, and the Apostle Paul said that people were actually getting sick, and some were even **dying** as a result (1 Cor 11:30).

God says, “*My ways are not your ways and my thoughts are not your thoughts*” thus often, the “*normal*” or “*natural*” way that we approach problems may in fact be completely wrong. And if the Christian community does not have a consistent and comprehensive Biblical worldview by which it can evaluate the values and practices of the broader community, it is quite likely that we will tend to become like the pagan society around us. Once those ungodly presuppositions become established, we then unthinkingly respond to life situations in a sinful manner that

then undermines the entire work of the church. Hence, since gossip, slander, whispering, back-biting, shading the truth, etc., are all considered “*normal*” and “*natural*” by the world, Christians can be easily seduced into thinking the same way; and acting the same way. Thus what was once considered an abomination, is now just the way we do things...

Redefining Sin to Justify Ourselves

Now getting back on track, if God says that these sins are particularly revolting, we would do well to carefully consider just what they are. We **think** we know what “*gossip*” and “*slander*” means; but then we can be awfully good at changing the definition so that “*gossip*” is what someone else does while **we** are just “*sharing*.” So just what are these sins that God finds so heinous?

Mind Your Own Business

In Proverbs 11:13 Solomon writes, “***He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy conceals a matter.***” The first thing we can note from this proverb is a simple definition; a “*tale-bearer*” is one who “*reveals secrets*” and clearly, God does not see this as a good thing. There are those who delight in revealing other people’s private, personal information – and of course, there are those who like to learn such information. Basically, “*tale-bearing*” then is just another term for “*gossip*.”

We have to think a bit about this whole issue of “*secrets*” if we want to understand why God considers it such a “*bad thing*” to reveal them. The Apostle Paul, in a different context, but with a similar purpose in mind as Solomon wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:11, “...*make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business...*” The Greek word translated here as “*business*” has nothing to do with economic activity but means “*your own things*;” hence Paul is literally saying “*mind your own business*.” And that is the problem; some people like to stick their noses into other people’s concerns. Clearly there are things which are our concern,

and things which are **not** our concern and we must be able to distinguish between the two. In other places, Paul calls people who cross the line and meddle in the affairs of others “*busy-bodies*”

(2 Thess 3:11, 1 Tim 5:13).

Oh, they may say they have the most “*pious*” of motives when they want to “*reveal secrets*,” but often, the real motivation is that they want to run other people's lives; and one way of doing so is to reveal “*secrets*.” It gives them a feeling of power, control and makes them the centre of attention when they share the “*secrets*” to others. They get to judge people, criticize their actions, second guess their decisions and speculate on their motives. Of course, they usually do not have the “*guts*” to actually talk to the person involved; but they do love to “*share*” their “*secrets*.”

Thus one of the very first applications we can make is that God expects us to respect certain boundaries with other people. Yes, we are a body, and yes, we are to love, encourage, exhort and admonish one another. But some things are none of our business and we have no legitimate right to know about what is happening in someone else's life unless (1) they specifically invite our counsel, advice or assistance or (2) we personally witness them violating a specific Biblical principle.

In the first situation, each man ultimately stands accountable to God for how he lives his life, uses his time, spends his money, handles his family, etc. Of course a godly man will seek counsel and receive correction (Proverbs 12:1) but in the end, what happens in another person's life, business or family, is **their** business – after all they are the ones who will have to give an account before God on the great Day of Judgment. Therefore, when anyone comes to us wanting to share something negative, derogatory “*secret*” we need to understand that it is none of our business. We have no need to know these things and the person “*sharing*” such things is “*out of line*.”

Secondly, if in our relationship with a brother we see him committing some sin, then God says that we have a personal

responsibility to confront that sin, personally and privately (Gal 6:1, Matt 18:15). We cannot foist this duty off to others, the pastor, elders or friends and we certainly are not allowed to discuss it with friends; we are to confront it gently, kindly and humbly. Hopefully, the brethren will do the same for us when **we** sin, but never are we allowed to “*share*” another man's secrets.

Can You Be Trusted?

But there is even more to this proverb; to fully appreciate the meaning let's take a step back for a moment and consider how ancient Hebrew literature was written. Each Proverb is most commonly composed of a couplet consisting of two parts and is essentially, poetry. Unlike classic English poetry where we rhyme the sound of words (at least our poetry **used** to rhyme), Hebrew poetry “*rhymed*” ideas. Sometimes the second part of the verse restates the first part and therefore “*fleshes*” out the meaning. Sometimes the second part contrasts with the first part, therefore throwing light on the meaning of both.

Therefore, to really understand the meaning of this (or any other) proverb requires seeing how both parts work together. This proverb is more than a simple **tautology** (i.e., a statement that is true by its very definition – often regarded as a failure in logical thinking). In other words, God, through Solomon, is not just defining what it means to be a “*tale-bearer*” but also contrasting the tale-bearer with the man who is “*trustworthy*.” There are some people worthy of our trust and intimacy, and others who are not. A trustworthy man is someone you can trust with your “*secrets*.” He does not use his personal knowledge of your affairs as a means of exalting himself at your expense. He does not say one thing to you, and then run off and share something different with someone else. Over the years, I have been confounded by people who for whatever reason will have a conversation with me and seemingly agree with everything. They offer no objections, do not give any opposite line of evidence or in any way show that they disagree

with the conversation. Then, I find out that immediately after leaving my presence they went and reported the conversation to someone else, taking the completely opposite view!

In controversial situations this dynamic has probably caused me more problems than any other because I assumed that if a person disagreed, then they would state their disagreement honestly and openly to me. Even if we could not find a workable compromise we would at least then respect each other enough to speak what we think is true. But in reality, my experience has been that the average Christian will say one thing, in one setting, and then turn right around and say the complete opposite when with other people. I guess I am naive; and for a pastor this is a terrible failing to admit, but I just do not understand why anyone who is a Christian would do such a thing. Do they have no integrity? Sadly, I have learned the hard way that what Solomon says here is absolutely true; some people in the covenant community are just not “trustworthy.”

Hence, a “*tale-bearer*” **because** he reveals “*secrets*” is untrustworthy; he is a man who lacks personal integrity, devalues truth and often is a moral coward. Such people will not keep a secret because, ultimately, they value the approval of men more than God. Therefore, they break faith with you because nothing is more important to them than their own sense of feeling “*important*” or “*accepted*.” Many Christians have learned that being “*vulnerable*” and “*open*” with their brothers is the surest way to have their reputations ruined.

Now think with me for a moment as we meditate on this Proverb and its implications. Today, in our modern society, we have essentially reversed the above principle that values keeping confidences. In our culture, with our tradition of a free press that serves as a guardian against governmental tyranny, we highly value “*whistle-blowers*” and the like who reveal scandals; “*secrets*” that those in power would rather keep, well, secret! Whoever controls the communications of a culture controls the culture.

Tyrannical governments have a vested interest in hiding, distorting and controlling what information is available to the citizenry. America, from its founding has always valued an independent and free press that will expose governmental or commercial malfeasance.

And of course, this is a worthy and noble goal (though how “free” our press really is requires another essay). But the problem is that somehow somewhere along the line we have confused what citizens have a legitimate right to know about public figures, and delighting in learning “secrets” through gossip and slander. In other words, there are “secrets” and there are “**secrets**.” In a free society, the people are the rulers and therefore, have a personal stake in what their civil magistrates do, and how they do it. The issues of government are our business.

Hence Solomon is not here commending covering up some governmental or even personal sins so that people can get away with evil. No, instead, he is assuming that the proper mechanism is being used to confront sin; and revealing “secrets” is always the last stage of dealing with sin, and used **only** when the man has shown himself hard-hearted, unrepentant and reprobate (cf. Matt 18:15ff).

For example, when King David sinned with Bathsheba and conspired to murder her husband in order to cover-up their adultery, Nathan the prophet did **not** gather a group of concerned citizens together to discuss the king's “indiscretions” or publish David's sins in the *Jerusalem Enquirer*. Instead, Nathan went personally to the king and confronted him Biblically. David then repented, and God decided to punish him personally (rather than through His human courts) by cursing David's family (2Samuel 12).

Our point here is that there is right way and a wrong way to handle “secrets.” The “tale-bearer” in Scripture is not regarded as a noble, courageous public servant but rather as an untrustworthy, even cowardly individual who destroys lives by revealing secrets

rather than confronting them Biblically.

The godly man, on the other hand, does not “conceal” a matter because he is afraid, or because he does not want controversy; to the contrary, he actually takes personal responsibility to do what God requires when he discovers a brother in sin. Only when a man has been repeatedly and Biblically confronted with his sins but remains unrepentant does the issue become a matter of open disclosure and then only to those concerned (Matt 18:15ff).

Let us be honest; all of us have “secrets” because we all fall short of the glory of God. Ideally, when we sin, all that is needed is a gentle reminder from the Holy Spirit to bring us to immediate repentance and restoration. Occasionally, we need to have others come along side, as Nathan did to David, and confront us because we are simply not listening to the Holy Spirit. But the “tale-bearer” is not concerned about our repentance or restoration; he just likes to dig up dirt. Revealing our “secrets” gives him a feeling of power, it makes him the centre of attention and therefore demonstrates that he is lacking in the most basic, Christian moral value – the commitment to doing what is right and good for others (see Phil. 2:2ff).

One of the many applications we ought to take from this Proverb is that unless you are willing to go to your brother and confront him, you have no right to even **know** about his sins, let alone discuss them with others. Yes, there is certainly a degree to which the spiritual health of your brother is rightly **your** business; provided you are willing and able to minister to him. But give yourself this little test; do I need to know about my brother's sin? Why is this person telling me this about my brother? Does it glorify God to listen to it? And, finally, if I know something about another, why am I sharing this information with anyone? Does **anyone** else have the need to know? A good rule of thumb is to **never say anything about anyone that you have not already said to the person himself**. Just following this little principle would keep most of us out of trouble with our brothers, and God.

Gossip as Slander

Moving on with our definition of the sins of speech that God finds abhorrent, in Proverbs 20:19 Solomon says "***He who goes about as a slanderer reveals secrets, therefore do not associate with a gossip.***" Please again notice how the parallelism equates the slanderer, with the tale-bearer (revealing secrets). Now gossip as usually defined means basically sharing unsubstantiated derogatory information about others, while slander is more concerned with sharing false, derogatory (or damaging) information. But God here through Solomon basically equates the two. In other words, in God's mind there is not much difference between slander and gossip.

Slander seems to be a more intensive form of gossip from the Biblical perspective but both achieve the same end; to destroy men's reputations. A slanderer may **intend** to hurt another by repeating false claims, but the gossip essentially achieves the same end, even if he does not particularly wish his victim any particular harm. Now, a slanderer might be easier to spot for the average person because he is spreading his false reports maliciously while the gossip is just "*sharing*" something he heard. However, the gossip usually cannot confirm what he is saying; hence he does not really "*know*" that the accusations are true but passes it on as **if** it were true, and gullible people believe and act accordingly.

Years ago when I first started out in the ministry my wife and I were once the victims of some vicious gossip that cost me a job; literally, I was hired on a Friday and fired on a Monday because of gossip. Elaine, being from England which has no mosquitoes, has no lifetime immunity to their venom. When the average American gets bitten by a mosquito, we usually get a small, red bump that itches a bit, but it is no big deal. Elaine on the other hand when she first came to America would get enormous swellings on her arms or legs when she was bitten. One day, we went for a walk in the woods together and despite covering ourselves in insect repellent, she missed a spot right near her eye. Well, you can guess what

happened; she got bitten right by the corner of her eye. The next morning as we got up to get ready for church, there was an enormous swelling right by her eye. We both joked that it looked as if someone had really hit her there; we shouldn't have laughed.

Since we were attending a large, broad evangelical church, many of the women there did not like my public stand that women ought to submit to their husbands. This made me a "*male chauvinist pig*" in some people's eyes; clearly a sign that I was an abusive husband. No, **nobody** said a word to us that morning about Elaine's eye, though she did explain what had happened to friends we were sitting with. But the word went out, Brian was beating his wife. Of course, nobody ever actually **said** that to me; but the gossips were having a field day since their assumptions about me were confirmed by the huge bump by Elaine's eye.

Now, I only found out about this gossip a few months later when I was hired as an associate pastor at that church. When I reported for work on Monday morning I was told that I had to be fired because I was a "*wife-abuser*." The "*proof*" of course was that bump on Elaine's eye. When I tried to explain that it was a mosquito bite, they actually laughed at me! After all, these people had been bitten by mosquitoes all their lives and **they** never had such an allergic reaction! So of course, everybody "*knew*" that I must be lying to cover up my sin!

Yet not **one** of those people who accused me ever came to me. Furthermore, we later found out that the accusation had been "*confirmed*" by "*friends*" of ours who went out of their way to "*reveal secrets*." It seems they didn't approve of the way that Elaine and I resolved a conflict one time, and concluded "*he is probably abusing that poor girl*." Again, our "*friends*" never said anything to us, but they sure were willing to "*share*" our "*secrets*" with others. Of course, in this case, there was no "*secret*" to share; we had a conflict, flubbed it, repented of it, asked forgiveness of each other and moved on. But these hypocrites (a word meaning literally "*two-faced*") shared the conflict, but not the resolution.

And once the church's mind was made up, nothing could convince them they had made a mistake. Now that I look back on the situation, I praise God that I didn't keep that job; if the elders of a church can make such poor decisions, based on such irrational criteria; they are not competent leaders to whom you can confidently entrust the care of your soul. But it hurt terribly then; and that false accusation continues to occasionally rear its ugly head, even to this day. You see, the real problem was never anything I actually did wrong, but stemmed from certain godless women who objected to a man teaching male headship in the home. Therefore to destroy the doctrine, they had to destroy the reputation of the man who taught it. But the people I am most disappointed in are all those who listened to the gossip, formed a negative opinion and then passed that assessment on, without ever once simply asking us about it!

The proverb concludes with a straight-forward command to not associate with such people. Now there could be several reasons for this exhortation; perhaps the most obvious is that if you associate with people who “*reveal secrets*” then do not be surprised when they then reveal **yours**! Thus listening to gossip, let alone being friendly or intimate with people who gossip, is sin. Did you get that? We have a direct, straightforward command from God that **we must not associate with gossips**. If a person cannot bridle his tongue, and revels in sharing negative information about others, not only is he condemned by God, but so are we, if we associate with them.

Over the years, I have been astounded at the lack of discernment that so many people seem to possess when they associate with people known for gossiping and slandering others. While they **love** to hear “*juicy*” information about others, they fail to appreciate that **their** lives are just as much fodder for the gossips as anyone else's. And time and time again, I (or the elders) have been called in to settle some bitter, acrimonious conflict when one person found out what was said about them to another. Isn't it

easier just to stop talking about other people and refuse to associate with those who do?

Life is too short, with too many problems that cannot be avoided to intentionally involve ourselves in these kind of bitter, nasty squabbles that only bring hurt and pain to all involved.

And yet, often, too often, Christians continue to actually support and defend gossips and slanderers rather than rebuke or correct them. If just a few Christians would state, *“this is gossip, you have no right to share this and if you continue, then I cannot associate with you any longer”* the church would dramatically change over night.

I have seen one or two gossips literally tear a church to pieces as they incessantly called people on the phone, time and time again, sharing derogatory information. I have even had elders come to me, in the deepest pain, complaining about certain people calling their wives and turning their whole household upside down. Yet, when I suggested, *“tell your wife to stop talking to that gossip”* I was then accused of being a cruel, hard-hearted monster!

Truth and Deceit

Thirdly, in terms of defining just what constitutes gossip and slander, Proverbs 12:17 says, ***“He who speaks truth tells what is right, but a false witness, deceit.”*** Again, please note that there is both a comparison and a contrast being made here between the one who speaks the truth, and the one who speaks deceit. The man who speaks the truth *“tells what is right.”* The Hebrew word here means *“accurate, fairly, just, or righteous.”* Truth is a communicable attribute with God (i.e., something that we share with Him) and if we love God, then we have to love the truth (Jn 4:24). Since the very concept of truth is based on the unchanging character of God, there is a *“true”* truth, or a truth that is true for all men, in all ages. Truth is objective; there are not some things true for some people and another *“truth”* for others.

In our modern world, heavily influenced by ungodly philosophical presuppositions, many Christians do not

understand this principle and act as if their own subjective impression is the same thing as “*truth*.” In many evangelical fellowships sincerity is often considered more important than truth; as long as someone is “*sincere*” in what they believe, we are not to judge or condemn them.

For what it is worth, I think this idea may have begun with a legitimate desire for Christian unity despite some minor doctrinal differences; Christians can sincerely come to the Scriptures and sometimes differ in what they think they mean. And as a legitimate application of the Biblical principle of “*liberty of conscience*,” we have come to believe that it is more important to love and accept our brothers **despite** these minor theological differences than to let our churches be full of animosity and acrimony.

However, while the Bible clearly allows for “*liberty of conscience*” we all recognize that there are limits to what beliefs a person can “*sincerely*” hold and still be considered a Christian. For example, someone who “*sincerely*” believes that Jesus was really just another created being and not literally God cannot be considered a Christian. Someone who believes that Jesus never rose from the dead, or that He did not fully pay the price for our sins by His death on the cross, is clearly outside of basic, Christian orthodoxy. No matter how “*sincere*” such people may be in their beliefs, that sincerity is simply no substitute for truth.

This principle must also apply to our interpersonal relationships and conflicts; simply because a person “*sincerely*” believes something to be true, does not necessarily make it true. If for example, a Christian “*sincerely*” believes that “*Bob*” is a drunkard, does that mean that “*Bob*” actually **is** a drunkard? No, we would insist that such a statement must be backed up with some facts; in other words, how do you **know** that “*Bob*” is a drunkard? What evidence can you offer to support this accusation, and can it be shown that the evidence itself is credible and reliable?

This is the very thing that Solomon is getting at in this Proverb;

the godly man speaks what is right; he is speaking the truth; not just his subjective, personal “*impression*.” And if it **is** the truth, then therefore there must be some objective means (or evidence) by which that truth can be demonstrated or proved.

Sadly, in many evangelical fellowships, people are willing to believe all sorts of horrible things about others based on nothing more than their own (or someone else's) subjective, personal opinion.

Now, let us be honest, all of us tend to like certain people more than others. And let us be even more honest, there are some people in the Christian church that can be really, **really** hard to get along with. They might not exactly be horrible, nasty, evil people, just folks with whom we do not “*click*.” Sometimes there are just aspects of their personality, life-style, temperament, etc., that we do not care for. And, yes, sometimes they may have character flaws, besetting sins, personality quirks etc., which can make them hard to get along with.

And I would argue that basically, there is nothing wrong with subjectively enjoying some people more than other people; God never tells us we have to **like** everyone in His church, just love them; which is not at all the same thing. Again, for whatever it is worth, I think we often manoeuvre ourselves into a corner philosophically because we confuse *liking* a person, with *loving* them. To love someone means a commitment to do what is right for them, despite the cost (e.g., Romans 5:8). Granted, it is easier to do what is right for someone when we like them, appreciate them, or find them compatible; but love and like are two different things.

Now watch the dynamic here; if we confuse “*like*” with “*love*” then if we dislike someone we feel guilty; after all, we know that we are supposed to love the brethren and all. But if we don't like people, then there is either a problem in us or in them. Now guess which side of this question the deceitful and desperately wicked human heart tends to come down on? Yes, you are correct; the average person comes to believe that if they do not like someone,

then there must be something **wrong** with that person. Therefore they tend to find reasons to justify their dislike!

Psychological and sociological research has demonstrated that when we like people, we tend to justify, rationalize or excuse their behaviour; while if we dislike them, we tend to be critical, judgmental and negative towards exactly the same behaviour. Thus, there is a tendency to subtly distort the truth when bearing witness about people. We can always find reasons to justify why **this** person is “OK” while “*that*” person is not; even though they might have done exactly the same thing!

The point of Solomon's observation here is that regardless of our personal, subjective likes and dislikes, the righteous man, the godly man must rise above his personal feelings to fairly, justly and righteously evaluate a situation and give accurate and just testimony about it. In other words, **if we cannot PROVE that something happened, then we have no right to an opinion about the matter and we certainly cannot bear witness about it.**

The false witness on the other hand, is inherently deceitful because at heart he does not love the truth. Never forget that the human heart is “*deceitful and desperately wicked,*” and therefore men will always try and find ways to justify themselves (or their friends) while unrighteously criticizing or judging others. We often call such people “*Pharisees*” just because they use different standards when evaluating their own actions than they do when judging others. Often, their underlying motivation is to elevate themselves at the expense of others. **Never underestimate the degree to which sinful men will try to make themselves feel important by destroying the reputations of others.**

For the ungodly man, his own desires, expectations, goals, etc., are all that are really important. Like Adam and Eve in the garden, the wicked man wants to be a little “*god*” determining good and evil based on his own standards. Therefore when reality conflicts with his own, subjective impressions, he will intentionally distort,

twist or even deny the truth.

Let there be no mistake here; the gossip and slander always hurts another person by attacking his reputation. Whether self-conscious or not, the motivation behind both sins is usually that tearing another person down makes the gossiper look better or superior in comparison. But in order to make himself look good, certain facts are ignored, while others are given undue prominence. Actions that would be chuckled at if committed by him (or a friend) can become the basis for a vicious, devastating attack on another man's spiritual integrity or godliness. Rumours take the place of evidence, and so a false picture is presented of a man, his life and his character because at heart is the desire to hurt him, to humble him so that the slanderer looks better.

In all these areas, the first victim was a commitment to objective truth. It is a sad commentary on today's Christian community that our feelings about something are often far more important to us than the truth of a situation. If we are angry we look for reasons to justify our anger, rather than examining our anger to see if it was truly merited. If we feel threatened, hurt or upset by what someone else said or did, we seek to prove that they were a "bad" person for "making" us "feel" that way; rather than hauling out our own hearts to see if maybe there is something wrong inside us.

The godly man on the other hand seeks the truth; not personal justification. And therefore, if someone who claims the Name of Christ distorts the truth, then that says something profound about what is really in that person's heart. Jesus said, "*By their fruits you will know them*" and if some people seem to delight in producing the bad fruit of bearing inaccurate, false, and misleading witness, then there is a serious problem at the very centre of their beings.

The False Witness

Another important definition of what God finds horrible in the sins of speech can be found in Proverbs 14:5 Solomon says, "**A**

faithful witness will not lie, but a false witness speaks lies."

Now when considering this proverb, let us note first that there is a difference between deliberately lying and giving inaccurate testimony. In the previous proverb, we sort of focused on the sincere witness who, because of confusion, or subjective standards, or even personal malice, misunderstood a situation and therefore gave inaccurate testimony. If therefore, a man wants to be a "*faithful*" witness, he will need to understand how his views could be distorted or prejudiced. He ought therefore to cultivate a sense of humility about what he thinks he has seen or heard.

However, the problem is actually worse than that; some men intentionally and deliberately lie. Rather than just being confused about something, this kind of person will lie to make his case. We usually want to believe the best about other Christians and of course, like other transgressions of the moral law, we assume that if a person **is** a Christian, then they would not intentionally lie. Thus we tend to take accounts on face value and believe things simply because we trust the person making the report.

However, this is a bit naive on our part since God warns us that "*not all*" who call Jesus "*Lord*" are in fact God's children (Matt 7:21). And one of the ways you can **tell** if a person is really a "*wolf in sheep's clothing*" is whether they lie. Look, we all know about the temptation to shade the truth in our favour or put the best "*spin*" on something when we have a vested interest in an issue; and yes, sometimes, because we all fall short of the glory of God, we might even go beyond that and in a desperate situation find ourselves lying because we think we need to.

Of course, the man who loves God will **repent** of his sin. Even though it is painful and embarrassing to admit that he may have lied, if the Holy Spirit is actually present in a man's heart, there is no other option; he must repent – which of course means correcting the lie and telling the truth. The ungodly man on the other hand will refuse to repent, and continue to lie, often even when his lies are exposed. I want to believe that when Christians

give inaccurate reports about others – assuming that such reports are actually justified by the “*need to know*” – they usually do so because they sincerely do not appreciate what God says about the importance of truth. But the point here is that some people will intentionally lie to serve their interests. They know full well that the gossip and slander has no basis in reality; but they share it anyway. Sometimes they even claim a “*higher*” good; but they are still liars.

But an even more significant application is that God requires us to give faithful, accurate and true witness. Therefore we must learn how to “*speak the truth in love*” and if we do not **know** the truth, then we ought not to speak at all. For if we speak untruth, even if we were “*sincere*” then God says we are liars and come under condemnation.

The Worthless Man

God further defines just who the gossips and slanderers are in Proverbs 16:27 where He inspires Solomon to write: “***A worthless man digs up evil, while his words are as a scorching fire.***” Here God is saying something profound about those who like to discover “*dirty*” about others and pass it on. And sadly, most of us have met more than a few people like this over the years. They stick their nose into other people's business, passionately collecting all sorts of negative information about others which they then delight in “*sharing*.”

It is one thing when we personally encounter “*evil*” and something quite different to go looking for it. Every day, every one of us comes face to face with “*evil*” in its different forms; after all, we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. The man submitted to God confronts that evil in himself and others, with tact, gentleness and humility (2 Tim 2:23-24), forgives and moves on.

However, the “*worthless*” man actually delights in finding out bad things about other people.

Maybe the reason as we noted earlier, is that when he sees evil

in others, it makes his own sins seem less horrible; and by tearing other people down, he thinks he can make himself look better by comparison. However, those who *“compare themselves among themselves are without understanding”* because God is the ultimate standard and judge. It is not how good we look in comparison with others that really matters; it is how we compare to God's holy and unchanging character. And if we compare ourselves with God, it must inevitably lead to humility – both before Him and before others. How can we be arrogant towards others when we come to appreciate just how far **we** fall short of the glory of God?

So why would **any** Christian think for a moment that by tearing others down he somehow makes himself look better? Well, the short answer is that someone who does this is revealing some pretty rotten fruit; and if the fruit is that bad, maybe, the real problem is a heart that has never been regenerated?

The Perverse Mouth

Proverbs 16:28 defines gossip by saying *“A perverse man spreads strife, and a slanderer separates intimate friends.”* Notice that a person who *“spreads strife”* is called *“perverse.”* The word *“perverse”* means, *“showing a deliberate and obstinate desire to behave in a way that is unreasonable or unacceptable, in spite of the consequences.”* Gossip is defined here as spreading strife. When we have a problem with someone and do not resolve it, but rather include other people in it, then we are gossiping.

Furthermore, while technically there is a difference between *“gossip”* and *“slander,”* here Solomon is essentially equating the two. As we noted earlier, gossip basically means *“unconstrained conversation or reports about other people”* usually with the idea that the conversation includes derogatory or unflattering information (and information not necessarily proven). Slander on the other hand means *“making false and damaging statements about someone.”*

The *“perverse”* man described in this proverb, spreads strife by gossiping or slandering others. And as a consequence of sharing

derogatory information about people, he “*separates friends.*” As a pastor, I have seen more relationships ruined over the years by gossip and slander than any other single factor. Someone has a problem with another, but rather than go to that person and work out a resolution, they “*share*” their hurt, frustration and pain with others. Those people in turn, “*share*” the problem with still others, spreading the strife. People then start taking sides on the issue and animosity begins to build as positions polarize. Eventually, relationships are destroyed, families ripped apart, churches split and ministries derailed all because the primary people involved would not sit down together and talk to each other.

When people have a conflict or problem, it breaks their relationship. When they then gossip about the other person, rather than resolving the problem, they are simply spreading the problem to others, just as if they were spreading some horrible, infectious disease. But as sad and frustrating as it might be for the two principals to fall out is the perverse, wicked and ungodly actions of everyone else in the chain that, often gleefully, spread the gossip and slander.

Now think with me for a moment; what would you think about someone who deliberately infected you with a deadly disease? Would you consider the person who intentionally infected you a “*friend?*” Why would you allow yourself to be infected by that person in the first place? Yet that is exactly what “*spreading strife*” does; it infects **you** with someone else's conflict, destroying your relationship with them. Yet often, not only do we not **mind** being infected, we deliberately seek it out! Now what does **that** say about the condition of our own hearts?

Remember, slander is a false accusation; it does not matter if the person making the accusation sincerely believes it – the issue is whether or not the accusation is true. Gossips often share nasty, derogatory information **as if it were** true; and others accept and believe those accusations as **if they were true**. But sometimes, often, the accusations are **false** (or at least they cannot be proven

to be true). Even our secular courts recognize that making public false statements that negatively affect a man's character is a civil crime; you can be sued for making slanderous statements about another; even if you were “*sincere*” in your belief.

Yet most Christians seem to think nothing of “*sharing*” nasty, hurtful information about others in their church or even family, seemingly unconcerned that doing so is destroying relationships or even ripping families apart. First, we listen to some “juicy” bit of information; but we never actually **go** to the accused to see if it is true. Then without a second thought, we get on the phone and “*share*” the information with others. And throughout the process, we never seem to ask ourselves what God thinks about our actions. Well, as Solomon states above, God thinks it is “*perverted*.”

The Evil Listener

Maybe more of us ought to memorize Proverbs 17:4 “***An evildoer listens to wicked lips, a liar pays attention to a destructive tongue.***” Did you catch that? God says that someone who listens to lying lips is an “*evil-doer*.” Wow; bet that one made you stop and think for a moment. Gossip and slander serve no healthy, useful purpose in the body of Christ. As we have already seen, God equates it with the worst sorts of abominations. Gossip and slander are **so** horrible that simply **listening** to it makes a person an “*evil-doer*.”

Furthermore, God calls us “*liars*” for paying attention to those with a “*destructive tongue*.” Did you get that? Usually we think of “*liars*” as those who speak falsehoods, but here God says the people who pay attention to “*destructive tongues*” are “*liars*.” In other words, what sort of people intentionally listen to those with a destructive tongue? Well, liars do. OK, basic test on Logic 101: if liars are the only ones who “*pay attention*” to those with a destructive tongue, and **you** listen to someone with a “*destructive tongue*” what does that make you? This is a sobering thought, isn't it?

Now, just what does Solomon mean by a “*destructive tongue*?” We could do an exhaustive study here on the use of the tongue, but let me share just one verse from Ephesians 4:29 as a basic premise; “*let no unwholesome word proceed out of your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification, according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.*” Paul here is amplifying what Solomon says throughout the book of Proverbs about the use of the tongue. Our speech can be categorized either as *wholesome* or *unwholesome*; wholesome speech builds people up, (“*edification*”) while unwholesome speech tears them down.

Therefore, allow me to suggest that in this Proverb, the “*destructive tongue*” is one that tears people down, rather than building them up. A destructive tongue is one that is willing to share hurtful, harmful information about others; revealing confidential information for no good purpose or reason. The destructive tongue does not share to bring about repentance, resolve a problem or assist another to become more holy before God; rather its intent, whether by ridicule, gossip, slander, revealing secrets, etc., is to hurt another person.

Sure, sins must be confronted and dealt with; like iron sharpening iron we all need the encouragement, exhortation and correction of our brothers (Proverbs 27:17, Proverbs 12:1, etc.). But when someone wants to share negative, nasty information about others, we really do have to ask ourselves, “*What is the purpose of this?*” It is one thing if a brother or sister comes to us and says, “*I have a problem with someone; help me resolve it*” and another when they say in effect “*let me share some great dirt...*” And remember, not only does God condemn the person “*sharing*” such negative information but He also condemns the person receiving it!

Therefore, there is **never** any justification or excuse for receiving a bad report about another person. If someone comes to us and wants to share something negative about someone else, or sends us an email or a package of accusations, we must not listen to it. Instead, if they have **personal** knowledge of the sins of another,

then **they** have a Divine obligation to go to that person and confront them. Our only godly responsibility is to encourage, exhort and help that brother **go** and confront. If that confrontation does not work out, then **we** might well be called in as one of the witnesses in the second stage (Matt 18:15ff). But even if we are being asked to come as a witness, that does not give the accuser the right to make his case to **us** beforehand.

If the person with the negative information does **not** have personal knowledge of another person's sin, then by trying to share that information to us, by definition they have a “*destructive tongue*.” God just does not give Christians the right to share negative information about others with anyone. When we receive character assassination emails – hit the delete button without even opening up the inevitable attachments.

The Gossip's Crooked Mind

God continues to expose the nature of gossips and slanderers in Proverbs 17:20 “***He who has a crooked mind finds no good, and he who is perverted in his language falls into evil.***” While strictly speaking, Solomon here is not specifically defining the sins of gossip and slander, there are several factors here that merit a little time and thought. First, gossip is unlawfully sharing negative information but it is legitimate for us to ask where that negative information originated from in the first place. Sometimes, of course there is truth to the accusations; a man might well be committing some sin and is not repentant. But usually, the kind of gossip that is the most destructive to relationships is just nasty, critical comments about others. Someone says or does something that someone else does not like or approve and then shares his disapproval with others.

Notice that in the Proverb above, the person who “*finds no good*” is said to have a “*crooked mind*.” There are people who are always finding fault with others, criticizing, judging, condemning, etc. A colleague of mine jokes that such people must have been baptized

in vinegar because of their bitter, cynical attitude towards others. Sadly, though I cannot prove it, there may be some metaphorical truth at least to his theory; there seems to be an awful lot of Christians in the average church who are always negative, nasty and bitter. They are always finding fault, always criticizing, never satisfied and always judgmental. And of course, they never actually **help** the situation; churches that tolerate these kinds of people seldom accomplish anything of significance for the Kingdom for long.

Solomon equates this person with a crooked mind with the man who is “*perverted*” in language. Now remember, “*perverted*” has come to have the idea of “*sexually twisted*” but that is not what the word means and is not what Solomon is concerned about here. To be “*perverted*” in language does not mean someone who “*cusses*” or tells “*dirty*” jokes, but rather refers to a stubborn, obstinate refusal to speak that which is right. In other words, a person with a crooked (meaning twisted or distorted, not criminal) mind does not see reality; everything is filtered through his “*crooked*” presuppositions. Therefore, when he speaks, his words are also twisted and distorted; and since he refuses to see things truly, he is “*perverted*.”

Thus if people **see** the world through distorted lenses, they are naturally going to **talk** about the world in distorted speech. But would you trust someone to drive you around whose vision was so badly distorted they cannot correctly see the road? Then why, would you listen to and believe someone who's **mind** is “*crooked*?”

The Rascal

Moving on, Proverbs 19:28 helps us understand what gossip and slander is when Solomon says, “***A rascally witness makes a mockery of justice, and the mouth of the wicked spreads iniquity.***” The word “*rascally*” means “*mischievous*” or as the British might say “*cheeky*” (i.e., impudent or irreverent). Now the context of this Proverb would suggest that it is primarily referring to a

witness giving testimony in a formal courtroom setting. Hence, a witness being “*impudent*” or “*irreverent*” when giving testimony makes a “*mockery of justice*” because a judicial declaration is a serious thing. An issue does not come to a trial unless there is a real problem; someone has been accused of something and if convicted, faces the court's sanctions. For a witness not to take his testimony seriously at best places another man's reputation at risk, but in certain situations could actually cost him his livelihood or even life.

But again, notice the two parts of the verse; following our basic principle of interpretation, the second part of the couplet amplifies and explains the first part. In this case, the “*rascal*” (which both in English and the original Hebrew has an almost “*affectionate*” connotation) is being equated with the wicked person who “*spreads iniquity*.” In other words, giving testimony is **so** serious, that the man who takes it lightly is considered no different from a self-consciously evil person deliberately spreading “*iniquity*.”

The context here clearly concerns a judicial situation, but the underlying principle can be legitimately extended to apply to **all** situations wherein we bear “*witness*.” We have already seen that for the most part, God forbids us from talking about others in a negative way; we either confront the person about the sin, or we refuse to listen – let alone pass along – derogatory information. But there **is** a legitimate way that we can and do talk about one another every day; it would be a pretty boring life if we could not share experiences with one another, discuss what is happening in people's lives, etc. And of course, in any close-knit community, there is a degree of latitude we have to lawfully talk about the trials, tribulations, and experiences of others with compassion, loving our neighbours as ourselves. If someone gets a promotion at work, or someone is sick, or buys a new car, or takes an interesting vacation, the general principles we have already explored do not forbid the people of God from talking about these things.

But when we do, we are in effect bearing “*witness*” about others;

we are testifying about what we believe happened in someone else's life. And therefore, **this** principle comes into play; we have to ask ourselves, when we talk about others, are we “*rascals*” making fun of people, shading the truth, etc., even for “*innocent*” reasons? By definition a “*rascal*” is someone just on the other side of “*right*” but for whom we retain affection. We might shake our heads at his actions, but well, “*boys will be boys.*” But God has a slightly different opinion of the “*rascal*;” He equates them with being evil because words are important. Shading the truth dishonours God because God **is** truth!

We were created in His image to reflect His glory (Psalm 19:1ff) and anything that detracts from that glory is sin (Romans 3:23). While the theologians have debated for centuries just what precisely it means to be created in His image, all are pretty much convinced it has nothing to do with physical appearance since God does not have a body as we do. Most therefore conclude that we reflect God in that we were given the ability to think, reason and speak. And through these, we have a moral sense of right and wrong, and the ability to govern His creation as His stewards. When God speaks, the words have meaning; worlds are created, light and life come into being; and through His words, He binds Himself by His own promises- “*God is not a man that He should lie...*”

God thinks that what we say, and how we say it is **so** important, that *He will judge us for every word we speak* (Matt 12:36). Therefore we are not allowed to mess around with the truth. When we report the “*facts*” about something, we need to make sure that our testimony is true and accurate; not just “*sincere*” – because God will judge us for the accuracy of what we say about others. Thus, we certainly may not shade the truth, or put our own “*spin*” on things, not even in a sense of “*fun*” because our God is the true God, and those who worship Him must do so in spirit and truth (John 4:24).

The Gossip as a Madman

In a related Proverb (26:18-19), Solomon says *“Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows and death, so is the man who deceives his neighbour, and says, ‘Was I not joking?’”* It seems that caustic, sarcastic and belittling humour is not a 20th century invention of late night talk show hosts. The comparison here is between a madman throwing firebrands with someone who makes false, nasty comments about others and excuses it as *“just joking!”* In the ancient world, fire in a community was one of the most feared of disasters. Houses were built close together and without running water and fire departments. Once a fire started, it could be impossible to stop before it burned down the entire city. The Roman emperor Nero became infamous for intentionally setting a fire in Rome which destroyed most of the city. Only a madman would throw firebrands in his own city.

Yet that is how Solomon regards people who deceive their neighbours, bear false witness about them, gossip and slander about them, and then try to justify it by saying, *“it was all in fun.”*

Remember the old children's rhyme, *“sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me?”* Well, the rhyme is wrong; dead wrong – words **can** and **do** hurt people – worse than sticks or stones. After all, if you hurt a man physically he can possibly, eventually heal from the wounds; but if you destroy a man's reputation, he may never be able to recover.

Remember, we are not isolated, atomistic individuals but were created to live within a community. One of the worst punishments that can be inflicted on prisoners is isolation from others; it causes a mental torture than can lead to madness and suicide. And to a great degree, our position in a community is determined by our reputations; what other people think about us. And if that reputation has been destroyed by gossip, slander, negative reports and false accusations, it can literally make it impossible for a person to live his life. It can destroy his ability to provide for his family because no one wants to hire or support a

person with a “*bad*” reputation. It can rip his family apart as his wife and children are humiliated in public. It can make him feel as if suicide is a real option because of the terrible pain and frustration.

And in doing so, gossips are not only hurting others, but “*throwing firebrands*” in their own “*city*.” Everyone wants to live in a community of people where there is love, toleration, acceptance and peace. But the gossip destroys not just the individual, but rips the entire community apart. When the smoke clears, and the ashes settle, he often then moves on where he can start another fire, someplace else.

Yet the average Christian never seems to consider any of this when they unthinkingly pass on some tidbit of gossip. They will destroy another person's reputation with no more thought than they would if stepping on an ant. Why would people who supposedly have Christ within them do such things?

Returning Evil for Evil...

Well, perhaps Proverbs 24:28-29 offers a partial answer “***Do not be a witness against your neighbour without cause, and do not deceive with your lips. Do not say, 'Thus I shall do to him as he has done to me; I will render to the man according to his work.'***” Here there are two aspects; being a witness against a neighbour “*without cause*” and “*deceiving*” with the lips. But the second part of the verse identifies the reason why the accuser is willing to bear false witness; they have been hurt and they want to strike out and make the other person feel their pain. And in order to cause that hurt they are willing to lie if necessary.

We can get our feelings hurt for all sorts of reasons; sometimes other people intend to cause us pain, but often there is an unresolved conflict that is the real issue. Someone may not intentionally want to cause another pain, but there is some sort of problem and rather than use Biblical means to resolve it, ask for and extend forgiveness and then move on, instead the conflict

becomes a source of bitterness. Someone may have said something to us or about us that we did not like. Perhaps we are envious of their success, appearance or abilities. Sometimes it may be that we are too concerned about wanting to be right, and they made us look “*bad*” by pointing out that we were wrong.

My point here is that people are often offended, not just because someone did something wrong to them, but that somehow we believed that their actions caused our pain. Perhaps they did not treat us the way we think we ought to be treated. Maybe they got a promotion we wish had been given to us. But whether they intended to or not, our pride was wounded; and we want to strike back at them.

Now clearly, there is a spectrum here; there are those who deliberately seek to hurt, humiliate or damage us in some way on one end (there are some really evil people out there) and on the other end are those who said or did something that we found offensive; but they did not intentionally want to do us any harm. And let us be honest, some of us are more “*thin-skinned*” than others, quickly taking offense at the most innocent comments.

And somehow, somewhere, many Christians have adopted an ethical argument from the playground that says, “*Well he hit me first!*” as a justification for striking back. In other words, “*I will treat you nicely as long as you treat me nicely: but if I ever think you have treated me wrongly, then I am morally justified in treating you the same way.*” Now of course, few people ever put it quite this blatantly, but all you have to do is look at the way the average Christian handles conflict and you can see this dynamic almost every day. As long as everyone is “*nice*” to you, then things are fine; but the first time a problem comes up, then the gloves are off.

Early on, when our children were first old enough (and verbal enough) to try and justify their actions, whenever the inevitable squabbles or quarrels broke out between them, one or the other would say, “*But he started it.*” And often, they were correct; the other child **was** responsible for initiating the problem. But almost

the very first Scripture verse we required our children to memorize was 1 Peter 3:9 "...not returning evil for evil or insult for insult but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing..." Our children needed to understand that their actions were not to be governed by situation ethics, but by the unchanging moral principles of God's Law. God says that in conflicts or confrontations, the evil that others may do to us does not justify our doing evil to them. Regardless of what others may do, we are always responsible to God for what **we** do. And therefore simply because someone may have hurt us is no excuse for us to hurt them in return.

Now, think with me about how this often works out in real life; someone offends us, maybe intentionally, maybe unintentionally. We feel hurt and we feel a "*natural*" reaction that we want to hurt them back. We are **so** hurt, and we want to hit back **so** badly, that we refuse to take God's instructions about dealing with offenses. We do not go to the person privately to resolve the problem; instead, we pick up the phone or sit down with a friend to tell them "*our side of the story.*" Now, again, the "*natural*" tendency is for us to report those things that support our case, and undervalue or even misreport that which would make the other person's case. So a picture is given that sometimes subtly, but all too often grossly, misrepresents what actually happened.

That "*friend*" who listens sympathetically to us thus receives a distorted picture of the events and because they are sympathetic, they feel our pain and are offended for us. Thus, the problem now has grown; no longer is it just a problem between us and the person who offended us (whether rightly or wrongly) but now it involves our friend as well. Furthermore, since this person was willing to unlawfully receive our negative report about another, it is highly likely that he will pass on that report to **his** friends; in effect, spreading the poison. And of course, this doesn't include all the other people that *we* shared the problem with! And as the story spreads, the distortions grow worse and worse. All of us played the

game of “gossip” as children; you know the one where a group of people sit in a circle and whisper something to the person sitting next to them. As the story goes around the circle, by the end, it seldom bears much resemblance to the original.

And this whole process is made worse when we intentionally misrepresent the facts, leave out key points, or give only one side of the story. While we are getting a little ahead of ourselves, every Christian ought to memorize Proverbs 18:17 *“The first to state his case seems just until another comes and examines him...”* Too often, we allow people to share one side of the story, and do not want to take the time or trouble to hear the other side. We therefore rush to judgment on an issue, pass on false information and so participate in destroying the reputations of others.

The Flatterer

In terms of defining gossip and slander, Proverbs 29:5 should be considered ***“A man who flatters his neighbour is spreading a net for his steps.”*** The word “flatter” is another one of those English words that has undergone a subtle transformation in popular usage. Today, the word “flattery” at least in common usage means essentially, *“saying nice things to a person.”* A young man might “flatter” an attractive girl, who may demurely refuse it, but actually enjoys the compliment. We can talk about a dress that “flatters” a woman's figure, which means basically that it makes her look good.

However, technically, “flattery” is *“lavish, insincere, praise”* for someone, with the idea of furthering one's own interests. Throughout the Bible, flattery is **never** a positive thing and is routinely condemned (see Job 32:21, Psa 5:9, 12:2, 3, Psa 36:2, Pvbs 7:21, 26:28, Pvbs 2:16, 7:5, 28:3, 29:5, Ezk 12:24, Rms 16:18, 1 Thess 2:5, Jude 1:16). Now, there are at least two reasons for the Bible's condemnation for “flattery.” First, as we have seen, truth is important and therefore, we must strive to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15) to one another. Encouraging people does not require us

to say false things; even falsehoods people would like to believe. But just as importantly, we are not supposed to try and manipulate or control others for our own ends. Sadly, many of us actually **enjoy** flattery because in our heart of hearts, we **want** to believe all those nice things someone is saying about us – and that makes us susceptible to being manipulated by others.

As I am writing this, there is a new “*reality*” show on American television wherein the **worst** singers are being told they are really “*super-star*” material and invited to participate in a national competition. This television show is inherently cruel (the “*exciting climax*” is where these poor dupes will be humiliated on national television); but what makes the situation so pathetic is the number of people with absolutely no talent, who are willing to believe the flattering lies of the hosts. These people are completely self-deceived about what they can, and cannot do and therefore are willing to accept the most outrageous flattery as “*true*.”

Now, as sad and pathetic as American television may be, it is even worse when Christians are also so easily deceived and taken in by flattery. Over the years, I have written several times that when new people visit our church I can almost always spot future trouble-makers. These are the people who gush with enthusiasm about my “*powerful*” preaching, how wonderful our worship service is and how thankful they are finally to find such an incredible church since all the other ones in our community are “compromisers.” Now I **like** to think I faithfully handle the Word of God each week, and I am fairly confident that as a church, we are on the road to genuine Reformation and revival; but these people are **so** full of praise it is obvious that they are trying to flatter me, and hence, control me. And invariably, if such people actually stay in our church, they are the ones who later on will cause divisions, problems and schisms. I have learned that the people who flatter me today, will inevitably become my most vicious critics later on down the road.

But I have known a lot of Christians over the years who take the

flattery at face value, and since they want the flattery to continue, they therefore come under the sway of the “flatterers.” Now all of us want to be loved, respected and highly regarded by others; but at what price? Solomon specifically says here that the man who uses flattery is setting a snare for the one naive enough to accept it. Ungodly men often use flattery as a means of enticing us to listen to gossip. They say nice things about us so that they can poison us with their lies “*Oh Bob, I know you are a godly man who only wants what is best for the church; do you know what George did...?*” Let us face the facts: there are a lot of wolves in sheep's clothing who have found the church to be great hunting grounds just because so many Christians are willing to be deceived.

Therefore, along with gossip, slander and false witness, God also condemns flattery and warns us not to listen to it. If we do, then we are simply setting ourselves up for later, deadly, problems.

The Gossip as a Beast

Finally, let us see if we can summarize everything we have discussed thus far. Proverbs 30:14 “***There is a kind of man whose teeth are like swords, and his jaw teeth like knives, to devour the afflicted from the earth, and the needy from among men.***” This Proverb was written by Agur, the son of Jakeh, the oracle and does not follow the most common couplet pattern of Solomon's. But his words are just as inspired and here, he is warning us about a certain kind of person. When people settle a new area, one of the first concerns is the local wildlife. Animals can be very dangerous and while most people today live in modern cities, far removed from wild beasts, our ancestors knew first hand just how dangerous lions, tigers and bears (oh my!) could be. In some places in the world tigers, leopards and crocodiles still pose a real threat to people.

And this is just what God thinks about some men who use their lips for evil, rather than good; He deliberately compares them with a ravenous carnivore preying on the weak and helpless. In a sense,

this comparison is even worse than we think; man is to be above the animals because he was created in the image of God. Throughout history, the worst insults always involved comparing men to certain types of animals; for example calling someone a “swine,” a “dog” or even using the generic term “beast” means that they have forsaken human attributes and morals.

Thus the man or woman who perverts his speech to hurt, humiliate or destroy others, has in God's view, abandoned His Divine image and has become literally a “beast.” Insulting others, attacking their reputation, passing on negative, derogatory information or in any way using our tongues (or computers) to tear others down is a gross and horrible sin that dehumanizes us; we in effect become like animals who act only out of instinct and emotion, rather than the image bearers of God. In demeaning others with our words, we are in effect dehumanizing ourselves.

The next time you are tempted to pass on gossip, shade the truth, slander your neighbour or attack someone else's character, you might want to remember this verse. God says that those who do are no longer fully human, but something nasty, something bestial, and maybe even something demonic.

The Dangers of Slander

Surely, I am overselling my case here? While we all realize that gossip and such are bad things, isn't it a bit over-the-top to suggest that it is demonic? Well, we'll look at what God thinks about that in a moment (and I suspect that you will be shocked when you read what He has to say about these things). But right now, let us take a few minutes and learn just how dangerous and destructive the sins of speech are. I suspect, for whatever it is worth, that since gossip and slander are basically universal sins, committed routinely and even unthinkingly, we have become calloused towards them and forgotten just how destructive they really are. Since everyone does it, nobody really thinks about it; sort of like the old philosophical question of whether fish ever think of

themselves as being “*wet*.” In other words, when you are totally “*immersed*” in a particular value or cultural condition, you tend not to notice it: it's just sort of “*there*.”

But after reviewing all the Proverbs related to the sins of speech, it seemed to me that there were at least three distinct dangers of gossip; danger to others, danger to the community and danger to one's self. Let's take a look at these.

The Dangers to Others

Proverbs 25:23 states, “***The north wind brings forth rain, and a backbiting tongue, an angry countenance.***” Here Solomon makes a simple comparison between a cause and an effect. When the North wind blew, it brought with it rain, and when people “*back-bite*” they cause others to become angry. OK, this isn't exactly rocket science here, but it does demonstrate Biblically that our actions have effects. So in a manner of speaking, Solomon is saying here “*if you want to get people angry at you; then talk about them behind their back.*” And of course, if people are angry with us, then it breaks the relationship, robs both of us of our peace and makes life all the more difficult and stressful.

Furthermore, if our actions lead to making someone else angry, then it breaks down their defences and makes them susceptible to a host of other sins (see Proverbs 25:28). Now we do not have the time here to discuss the appropriate, lawful place of righteous anger (but see Ephesians 4:26 wherein a distinction is made between feeling angry and sin; clearly to **be** angry is not **necessarily** to be in sin), but for the most part, I think we can all agree that making other people angry by whispering behind their backs is not a “*good thing*.”

A basic, ethical principle, fundamental to Biblical Christianity is that we have a moral, covenant responsibility for the spiritual well-being of others (see Phil 2:3ff). This was modelled to us by the Lord Jesus wherein He willingly sacrificed Himself in our place; therefore we ought to do the same for others (Phil 2:5, 1 Ptr 2:21,

etc.). True, each and every person is responsible for their own actions and their own sins; but surely, does it not say something about our own hearts and attitudes if we ignore His laws and so contribute to a brother's sin?

Secondly, gossip, whispering, back-biting and slander "*crushes the spirit*:" Proverbs 15:4 "***A soothing tongue is a tree of life, but perversion in it crushes the spirit.***" Here God is contrasting the "*soothing*" tongue with a "*perverted*" one. Let there be no mistake, gossip, slander, back-biting, whispering, etc., **hurt**; they hurt terribly. I have known strong, godly men; men who have bravely put their bodies in harm's way in defence of their nation, be brought to **tears** when they became the victims of gossip and slander. One man told me once, "*I can handle my enemies; but God protect me from my 'friends'...*" I have counselled teenagers who actually believed that suicide was a better option than to go on living after being viciously, verbally savaged by their peers. And I have known good men, godly men, men with great gifts and an undeniable call to the ministry to literally be driven from their ministry just because they could no longer stand the constant whispering, gossip, slander and back-biting that goes on in the average church.

Now answer me this; since everyone knows just how hurtful gossip is, where did the Christian church ever get the idea that it was OK to talk behind people's backs? Doesn't the very presence of unconstrained gossip in our churches and fellowships tell us something really unpleasant about the state of modern Christianity?

Thirdly, remember how earlier we quoted that old children's nursery rhyme about "*sticks and stones*?" Well, consider Proverbs 25:18 "***Like a club and a sword and a sharp arrow is a man who bears false witness against his neighbour.***" I am not sure of the origins of the nursery rhyme, but whoever wrote it did not understand what God says about false accusations. He compares them with beating someone with a club, striking them with a

sword, or shooting them with an arrow.

Now again, think with me for a moment; if a fellow “*Christian*” invited you to join him in beating up a brother, or stabbing him, or shooting him, would you participate? Of course not; you recognize that such actions are immoral, ungodly and will bring not only God's but Caesar's judgment on you. So why, then, would you willingly, even gleefully, participate in listening to, or passing on gossip, slander or false accusations?

Granted, we can all say something that we did not intend – a “*slip of the tongue*” so to speak; but if our actions are contrary to the Law of God, and they cause someone harm; then we are still responsible. Let me see if I can illustrate this; every firearms owner understands that weapons must be handled responsibly and safely. The first part of every training program is teaching people basic safety rules; for example we teach three basic rules; (1) *all guns are always loaded* (2) *never point a weapon at anything you do not want to destroy* and (3) *keep your finger off the trigger until the sights are on the target*. Almost always, when a gun is unintentionally discharged, someone violated one or more of these basic “*rules*”

Now, human beings are imperfect, and everyone can make a mistake; but how would you categorize someone who **knew** these rules, but deliberately and wilfully violated them? Say he took a loaded weapon, aimed it another person and then pulled the trigger? Maybe in his “*heart*” he didn't “*feel*” hatred towards the other person, but the result of his actions was serious bodily harm or even death. No matter how the shooter may justify his actions in his own mind (“*I was just kidding around...*”) his actions show that he did not demonstrate care and concern for the other person.

Our tongues are like loaded weapons; we can use them to speak the truth, rebuke error, confront sin, and protect the weak or we can use them irresponsibly to hurt and destroy others. And a person who deliberately, intentionally and purposely spreads gossip or slander is no different than someone who walks through a neighbourhood shooting off a rifle at houses to watch the

windows break. He may not **intend** to hurt anyone, but at best his actions constitute gross negligence and if someone is killed, he will spend many years behind bars. Now if God compares the unbridled tongue to deadly weapons, ought we not to fear His Divine sanctions even more than Caesar's?

Finally, let us be under no self-deception; gossip, slander and false witness all stem from the wickedest of motives; the desire to hurt and crush others. Proverbs 26:28 "***A lying tongue hates those it crushes, and a flattering mouth works ruin.***" There are a number of interesting facets to this Proverb (for example, notice how it equates a "*lying tongue*" with "*flattery*") but the main point I would like to point out is that both stem from the same emotion; **hatred**. Oh, we might justify it to ourselves, or try to put some pious "*spin*" on our actions, but God says that both the liar and the flatterer "*hate*" the people they crush. Hatred, like love, is more than a feeling we have, but rather is actually defined by what we **do**.

Biblically speaking, love is a commitment to do what is right for another person, despite the costs and despite our feelings. Hatred can be defined in a similar way; it is not just having "*feelings*" of hatred towards a person but rather it is doing what is hurtful or destructive to another. And when we shade the truth, do not report all the facts, or even outright lie to **hurt** another, then we ought to realize that God sees this as "*hatred*" and we will be held accountable.

And this kind of hatred **does** "*crush*" people. Perhaps one has to have been the victim of a conscious campaign of gossip and slander to fully appreciate just how personally devastating it is to be on the receiving end of whispering, lying tongues. Most pastors know full well what I am talking about here; the unexpected racing of your heart, the feeling of anger, fear, and oppression, the nights spent tossing and turning in bed as you cannot get the wicked, false accusations out of your mind. When people are lying about you, it literally **does** feel as if a great weight is on you, crushing you down.

Food loses its taste, you can't sleep, and your work suffers because your normal enthusiasm and desire to serve God is clouded by the pain.

Some people can fall into a suicidal depression because the whole world looks dark and grim. While we look at how to handle gossip and slander in another section, let me just say here that having myself been the victim of wicked men who deliberately lied for no other reason than to destroy me, I cannot imagine how anyone could survive it that did not trust in the sovereignty and providence of a gracious God. I have suffered some fairly serious physical pain in my life; but nothing to compare with the psychic pain of being slandered by malicious gossips.

So think with me; if gossip, slander and false witness cause **so** much pain, and can make even the best men want to give up, does that not say something profound about its origins? Now **who** has the motive and incentive to want to destroy people and keep them from serving God? Answer that question my friend, and keep that answer in mind the next time someone wants to share something “juicy” with you (or you are tempted to share something “juicy” yourself) and perhaps you will reconsider...

The Danger to Your Community

Gossip, slander, back-biting and false witness are dangerous though, not only to others, but to the entire covenant community: Proverbs 11:11 ***“By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is torn down.”*** Now to be fair, the wicked can destroy a city with their mouths in many ways; for example, by causing division, inciting rebellion, endorsing sin and evil, etc. But surely, the wicked can also tear down a city with gossip and slander.

In the old days, a city was a community of people who needed to work together for the benefit of all. Therefore you had to depend on other people to do **their** jobs, so you could do yours. You had to trust that the bread-maker was not mixing sawdust with the

wheat, that the cobbler was not using cheap, inferior leather, or that the blacksmith was properly tempering his tools. And even though there were both economic and sociological incentives to work together, a city was always ultimately bound together by **trust**. If the relationships between the citizens broke down, if they were at war with each other, then they were easy “pickings” for their enemies. Thus the whisperer, the back-biter, the slanderer or the gossip could well bring the city to disaster by destroying the very fragile bonds of trust that were essential for the city to survive, let alone prosper.

In our modern culture, we have largely lost the idea of community. Urbanization, industrialization and rapid transportation means that many people in Western nations move frequently for better economic opportunities, or better living conditions. Children routinely move across the country from their parents and siblings – usually without a second thought.

As a result, we are separated from long term relationships; usually the friends we make are known to us only for a few years before we move on and find new friends. We now have essentially, “disposable” relationships because if this job, this friendship, or even this marriage doesn't work the way we want, why then we simply drop them and move on to another. This even affects our churches; most churches experience a radical turnover in membership after just a few years.

As a result, many, many people feel alienated, lonely and frustrated that somehow, they just do not “fit in.” We were created to live in covenant communities where we know people, and are known by them, and where we work through problems, difficulties and challenges together. Just talk with any combat veteran about the kinds of relationships that were forged “under fire.” Because they had no other option, the men in their unit literally became a “band of brothers” just because they came to understand that they needed each other. Units that do not find this sense of camaraderie or “*esprit de corps*” tend not to survive long

on the battlefield.

Though the sociological factors we discussed have an influence on this almost universal experience of alienation, perhaps there is a spiritual reason as well. Maybe we have lost the sense of covenant community just because we allow gossip and slander to go unchecked? Even today, outside of our immediate family, all other relationships are greatly influenced by our reputation. After all, one of the definitions of a family is a group of people who “*really*” know you, and love you anyways! Those outside of your family only get to spend a small amount of time with you, and therefore they cannot know you. Your reputation is based upon what other people say about you, based on very limited information.

But if wicked people gossip, slander, bear false witness and talk about you behind your back, it destroys the very fragile trust that is at the foundation of every relationship. At best, if your reputation has been savaged, then others just are not very “*warm*” towards you; at worst, they can literally make your life a living Hell.

Wicked people stir up strife, aggravate problems and ruin people's reputations all which destroy the sense of community. If people do not rebuke their wickedness, but listen to it and even worse, participate in it by passing it on, then the community will be ripped apart by controversy. Jesus, perhaps referring back to this Proverb (but applying it to a different situation) said it this way, “***Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste and any city or house divided against itself shall not stand...***” (Matt 12:25).

The Danger to Yourself

Finally, whether we realize it or not, gossip, slander and false witnessing is not only hurtful to others, but to the gossiper himself. Now this is just my personal experience here, and I am not sure that it can be proved as a universal part of the human condition, but for what it is worth, over the years I have found that those who routinely participate in gossip and slander are the most miserable

of people. They seem to be eaten up by bitterness, envy, anger and frustration, not to mention extremely dissatisfied with their families, job or relationships. Gossips, in my experience, are **not** happy people; the only thing that seems to give them any pleasure is trying to make everyone else as bitter and miserable as they are.

But never forget that we live in a moral universe, governed by a supernatural God who works all things according to His will. Therefore, God **will** judge this sin (just as He will every other sin) either here or in eternity. For example He promises in Proverbs 19:9 ***“A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who tells lies will perish.”*** Now this could be a reference to the Old Testament Law wherein a false witness was liable to the same punishment as the accused. Hence, if a man lied under oath and accused an innocent man of murder, then he himself was liable for capital punishment.

But I think it extends beyond this as a reminder that even though we might escape in this life the judgments of the civil magistrate, we can never escape from God's. He sees all that we do, He weighs our motives, and in His sovereignty, according to His timing, He will judge us. There are many “*Christians*” who are unrepentant gossips who are finding their lives full of misery, frustration, and pain – perhaps all those people we mentioned above are experiencing a down payment on God's eternal judgments?

Furthermore, God promises that ***“The one who guards his mouth preserves his life; the one who opens wide his lips, comes to ruin.”*** (Proverbs 13:3). Here is a specific promise (or a warning) that people who speak unthinkingly, **will** come to “ruin.” Now that “ruin” might take many different forms. Proverbs 18:6 warns that *“A fool's lips bring strife, and his mouth calls for blows.”* God here is not justifying “*punching someone's lights out*” but if nothing else, it does illustrate one possible outcome. Even if the fool is not literally struck by the person he slandered, his wicked mouth has still made him extremely unpopular, to say the least.

Proverbs 21:6 states that ***“The getting of treasures by a lying***

tongue is a fleeting vapour, the pursuit of death.” In context, this Proverb seems to be dealing with a man lying to further his economic situation, but a legitimate, broader application has to do with God equating a lying tongue with “*death*.” Unless someone bore false witness in a capital criminal case, lying in the Old Testament law did not usually require the death penalty. Therefore, Solomon is probably here using death in a metaphorical or spiritual sense. Those who lie are pursuing death, not life and therefore even though they might not find physical death in this lifetime because of their lies, they just might find it in the eternal state.

God does not think very highly of liars, gossips and slanderers and promises in Proverbs 21:28 that ***“A false witness will perish, but the man who listens to the truth will live forever.”*** Now notice the tense of the verb; they **will** perish. Liars and gossips **will** face His judgments – there is no doubt about it and therefore, wise men will carefully consider their actions accordingly.

Finally, consider Proverbs 10:31 ***“The mouth of the righteous flows with wisdom, but the perverted tongue will be cut out.”*** Now this proverb does not tell us **who** will remove the “*perverted*” tongue, it just promises us that it **will** be “*cut out*.” Thus, those of us who have not learned to control our speech – who gossip, slander and pass on negative information – are going to face God's judgment.

In our church we both read and sing the Psalms every week. We start in Psalm 1:1 and work our way to the end and then repeat the process. I was literally astounded that one of the recurring themes of the Psalms was David praying for deliverance from gossips, slanderers and false accusers. Since the Psalms are literally sung prayers, David was both pouring out his heart to God for deliverance, and then asking God to bring His providential sanctions against his false accusers. And if you know your Bible history, you also know that God heard those prayers and answered them. David's enemies were destroyed by God in time (as well as

judged in eternity).

Since the Psalms were given to us as the church's basic hymn book, to teach us **how** to worship God (Col 3:16), then it is instructive how many God dedicated to dealing with the problems we have been discussing. Gossip and slander are nothing new; Satan began it in the Garden when he called the character of God into question, attributing evil motives for God's law. The Lord Jesus calls Satan (whose name means "Accuser") the "*Father of Lies*" and his children follow his example. And this leads us to the next section; I found something in the Proverbs that should send a "*wake-up*" call to every Christian who has ever been tempted to share or listen to gossip...

The Gossip is Really Unregenerate

First things first; no man can know what is in another man's heart. When the Bible uses the word "*heart*" it never means "*the seat of emotions*" as we would think today, but rather the "*real*" or "*genuine*" essence of a person; who and what he really is deep, down inside. All that we can know about another person is what we can see on the outside, God alone knows what a man is "*really*" like.

Therefore, clearly, Christians should highly value being gracious, kind and loving towards others; seeking to bear all things, believe all things, hopes all things, endure all things (1 Cor 13:7) because we simply cannot know another person's heart. And this requires, in so far as possible, to always think the best of others. We all sin, we all fall short of the glory of God and therefore if there are two ways to look at a situation, we should always put the best interpretation on our brothers' actions and motives, not the worst.

However, even though we cannot see the heart, as we mentioned earlier, our Lord Jesus Himself told us that we can make lawful, legitimate judgments about others because "*by their fruits you shall know them*" (Matt 7:17, 12:33, Luke 6:43) In context, the Lord was referring to false prophets, but later on He applies the same principle to the Pharisees who were the most highly

esteemed religious leaders of His day. They were known for their fanatical obedience to the ancient traditions and created a whole new series of laws, much stricter than God's, supposedly to keep them from even coming close to breaking His commandments.

But Jesus knew that, despite all their "*holiness*", inside they were "*white-washed*" tombs – full of death and decay. In reality, they wanted to replace God's Law with their own – essentially recapitulating the sin of Adam and Eve who wanted to determine good and evil based on their own standards. And the Disciples could **know** that their hearts were wicked and unregenerate because they could see the "*fruit*" in their lives.

Now take a step back with me for a moment and think about what the word "*fruit*" means. Fruit is the product of a tree and the kind of tree determines the kind of fruit. You don't get apples off orange trees or pears from peach trees – so in this sense, the fruit itself tells you something important about the very nature of the tree it came from.

Now, generally speaking, apart from personal preference, an apple is not superior to an orange or a pear to a peach. But the fruit Jesus was discussing was not just "*different*" fruit, but rather between "*good*" fruit and "*bad*" fruit. And He says that trees that produce "*bad*" fruit are "*cut down and thrown into the fire*" (Mat 7:19). Trees that, for whatever reason, do not produce good fruit are a drain on precious resources, take up space that could be used to plant productive trees, and are therefore worthless.

Now, even though we might not like the implications, clearly Jesus means by this that those within the covenant community who produce "*bad*" fruit are going to be eternally judged. In the very next section (vs. 21ff) He specifically states that not all who call Him Lord will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Putting this all together, there are those who look from outside anyways, like "*good*" trees; but the reality is that they are "*bad*" trees because they produce "*bad*" fruit. Jesus considers these trees to be worthless, and will cut them down to be "*thrown into the fire.*"

In the immediate context, Jesus specifically applies this analogy to those who come in His Name, but are in reality “*false prophets*.” But please note, we are specifically commanded by Him to examine the fruit to make a determination whether or not the tree itself is good or not.

Thus far, we have been dealing with the problem of gossip and slander primarily as “*bad fruit*.” But now, let us go a step or so deeper and consider the source of that fruit. In fact, let me state it as baldly and clearly as I can: **those who gossip and slander others and do not repent reveal that they have a wicked, unregenerate heart.** Now this is a profound and terrifying position to take, because in doing so, I am saying that the people in **your** church, **your** family and **your** circle of friends who willingly, knowingly and unrepentantly participate in gossip are in fact “*Sons of Hell*.”

I know that this is a shocking point to make; hard to believe and even harder to accept – but as we will see, those who gossip and slander others, no matter how “*nice*” they may otherwise be, or how friendly we are with them, or what positions of leadership they may have had in the church, are in fact, agents of the enemy.

Now, how can I make such an outrageous sounding claim? This next series of Proverbs will demonstrate that the “*fruit*” of a man's lips demonstrates what is in his heart. Now, granted, even the godliest of men can sin with their tongues (Jas 3:2), but if a man **is** godly, then he will also repent of that sin and make appropriate restitution. However, **those whose hearts are actually unregenerate and wicked will not repent when they sin;** to the contrary, they will deny that they sinned, or attempt to justify and rationalize, their sins – or even blame their sins on others. In one respect, the essential difference between the regenerate and the unregenerate is determined by how a person handles their sin. Thus **men who repeatedly, willfully slander and gossip, and then do not repent are producing rotten fruit which must come from a rotten heart.**

The above thesis must be proved, rather than assumed, so let us start building our case for it one Proverb at a time. First, consider Proverbs 18:7 which states, ***“A fool’s mouth is his ruin, and his lips are the snare of his soul.”*** The fool in Proverbs is not a clown, but an ethical rebel. The fool does not have an intellectual problem, but an ethical one; he is in rebellion to God. He is a moral reprobate, denying the existence of God, arrogant, and willful, whose life is full of destruction and ruin. He is a fool, just because he insists on living life according to his rules, rather than God’s. And as a result, he brings disaster on himself and others. And here, Solomon is saying that one of the distinguishing marks of a fool is in his speech; it is not just what he thinks inside that makes him a fool, but rather what he speaks that shows he is a fool. And by definition, if a man is a fool, then his heart has not been regenerated; hence the very severe condemnation Jesus gives for throwing the term “fool” around lightly (Matt 5:22ff).

Proverbs 10:14 carries the same thought; ***“Wise men store up knowledge, but with the mouth of the foolish, ruin is at hand.”*** In both Proverbs, **the way that one can distinguish between a fool and a wise man is in their speech**; in other words, the “fruit” that reveals the “root” of the heart, is what we say, and how we say it.

Now it is legitimate to ask, just what is it about the speech of fools that brings about their ruin? Solomon provides the answer in Proverbs 10:18; ***“He who conceals hatred has lying lips, and he who spreads slander is a fool.”*** Now don’t just pass over this too quickly but think about it for a moment; we already know that the distinguishing mark of a fool is his sinful speech. Here however, the specific sin is spreading “slander” or false, damaging reports about others. Furthermore, and this is important, the proverb does not say that a “fool spreads slander” but rather that the person who spreads slander is a fool; see the difference? Anyone who slanders others is called a “fool” here. If in fact a fool is a person who is in self-conscious rebellion to God, and those who gossip and slander are

fools, then the conclusion is clear; “*Christians*” who gossip and slander are in reality, at heart, in rebellion to God.

This is a profound point and needs to be carefully considered. For with gossip and slander so common within the church, and Scripture giving so many condemnations of these practices, then clearly, we have a terrible problem. We should be rebuking gossip and slander, but instead, we listen to it, and then, often, pass it on ourselves. But if we have correctly understood these proverbs, then the godly response whenever anyone wants to share gossip ought to be a loving, but firm rebuke. And if there is no repentance, then we ought to practice church discipline and remove such people from the visible congregation of God!

Think about it; would you want unrepentant fornicators, adulterers, sodomites, murderers or thieves to be well-received and accepted in your church? Would you not think there was something seriously wrong with the pastor and elders if they not only refused to confront such sins, but were actively engaged in them, themselves? Would you for a moment entrust **your** family to this church's spiritual care?

Of course not; you recognize that though all may fall short of the glory of God, if men willfully, deliberately and consistently violate God's moral Law, and do not repent, that this reveals that such a church is, in fact, no church at all. You would run from such a “*congregation*” in a heart-beat because the rotten fruit clearly demonstrates that there is something sick and perverted going on here. So why, then, would you ever attend a church where gossip and slander, which God sees just as heinous as these other sins, is prevalent?

However, over the years I have run into a lot of controversy when trying to make the above point. Most Christians just refuse to see how horrible and disgusting gossip and slander is to God. And more than once I have had people rebuke me for calling such actions “*wicked*.” The word “*wicked*” defines someone who is self-consciously evil; a wicked man is more than just another sinner, he

is someone who is deliberately and intentionally evil, causing other people harm.

I think an argument can be made that the Bible itself makes a distinction between some sins and wickedness; Proverbs 6:30 *“men do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy himself when he is hungry, but when he is found, he must repay sevenfold, he must give all the substance of his house.”* Theft is a violation of God's moral Law and brings His righteous judgment; yet we do not despise a man who steals to fill an empty stomach, even if the Law requires that he make sevenfold restitution. The hungry thief is a sinner, but not necessarily wicked.

But the thief above is not intentionally trying to harm his victim; he is just willing to break God's Law to provide for his own needs. But how would one categorize a thief who broke into a person's home and deliberately stole everything he had, **just** to cause that person distress and harm – a thief who vandalized the home, who deliberately ruined all the bread in the house so that the family would go hungry? That is what the Bible means by *“wickedness.”*

Therefore, those who deliberately spread gossip and slander, with the intention of hurting others, must be considered *“wicked”* For example, in Proverbs 10:6 *“Blessings are on the head of the righteous, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.”* The wicked man here uses his words to *“conceal”* his wicked intentions to hurt or destroy others. The wicked man can be hard to spot because he tries to hide his wickedness with his words. He offers reasons, justifications, and explanations why he had to do whatever he was doing. But in reality, if the effect was to harm another, then the deed exposes his true motivation. Thus when gossips and slanderers destroy a man's reputation, no matter what their justification, their true character is revealed.

In the same way, Proverbs 10:31 *“The lips of the righteous bring forth what is acceptable, but the mouth of the wicked what is perverted.”* Again, the word *“perverted”* does not mean *“sexually kinky”* but

rather what is deliberately and obstinately untrue. If a man refuses to be corrected, who insists on affirming something, despite facts, reasons and arguments, then his thinking and his speech is “*perverted*.” I have personally known over the years a great many people whose reputations were destroyed by gossip and slander and when the people spreading those slanders were confronted with good, hard evidence that refuted their allegations, they refused to change their minds and stubbornly insisted that they were “*right all along*.” Their mind was made up, they refused to repent, and they often continued their relentless attack on innocent men. There is no other way to categorise these men other than as “*wicked*” just because they insisted on destroying others.

Proverbs 11:9 “***With his mouth the godless man destroys his neighbour, but through knowledge the righteous will be delivered.***” Notice here that one of the defining marks of being “*godless*” is the intention to destroy others with sinful speech. Many “*Christians*” will offer all sorts of justifications or rationalisations for their slander; usually, that some “*higher*” good is being served by “*exposing*” the “*sins*” of the accused. But in reality, envy, jealousy, bitterness and malice are usually the real, underlying motives. This proverb actually takes us back to an earlier reference we made to Ephesians 4:11 where Christians are to speak only that which will build up, not tear down. And one of the ways that we can identify wicked wolves, disguised as sheep, is by what they say and how they say it. Godly men “*deliver*” their neighbours; wicked ones seek to destroy them.

Since all men sin, occasionally, we all need reproof, rebukes, corrections and training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16) and godly men, speaking the truth in love help one another to become what God wants us to be. However, ungodly men want to destroy, to ruin men's reputations, destroy their livelihood or just cause them pain. And it is not that difficult to discern the difference between the two; simply ask yourself this question – **does the negative information being shared help or hurt the accused?**

Proverbs 12:6 ***“The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood, but the mouth of the upright will deliver them.”*** The picture here is of a beast lying in ambush for its prey and like certain animals the wicked wait for an opportunity to destroy their victims. They gather information, collect reports and when ready, launch an attack against people through gossip and slander. Now, if we compare this with the godly means of confronting sin personally and privately (cf. Gal 6:1, Matt 18:15) we can see that there is a clear distinction between the two methodologies and therefore, a clear difference between the basic motivation. **The godly man confronts to win his brother and restore him; the ungodly man instead attempts to destroy his victim.**

Over the past 25 years as a pastor, many men have confronted me over various issues; sometimes wrongly, sometimes rightly. In all these cases, a resolution was quickly and easily found and the two of us could live in peace and fellowship. However, I have also been the victim of a number of vicious personal attacks, and not once did any of these accusers actually ever come to me personally before gossiping and slandering me to anyone and everyone they could. Clearly, their motivation was **not** to correct any sins in my life, but rather to use any negative information they could get their hands on to destroy me. I usually only found out about these accusations after they had become widely known in the broader community. Usually, when I tried to confront the individuals making the accusations, they refused to meet with me, even threatening me with a lawsuit for “*harassment*” if I did not stop trying to contact them.

Therefore, it ought to be clear that if a person has a problem with another, and refuses to deal with it Biblically, and if they continue to gossip and slander trying to hurt rather than heal, then, by the definition given in the above proverb, they are “*wicked*.”

Proverbs 13:2 carries the same thought; ***“From the fruit of a man's mouth he enjoys good, but the desire of the treacherous is***

violence." We need to understand that within the body of Christ are those who **want** to hurt other people; they may do so out of envy, bitterness, covetousness or even just a malicious spirit. But these people are **not** Christians because the fruit of their lips is evil. It does not matter how nice they may have been to us, or how involved they have been in church activities, or how much money they have given; their mouths, God says, reveals what is really in their hearts. And if the mouth is wicked and destructive, then logically the heart is wicked and unregenerate. But if these kinds of people are in reality wicked, why then do so many Christians listen to them, defend them and allow them to spread their poison?

Proverbs 13:5 "***A righteous man hates falsehood, but a wicked man acts disgustingly and shamefully.***" In this proverb, a contrast is made between the righteous and the wicked, with the defining mark being "*hating falsehood.*" Again, since this is a parallelism, the second part should be interpreted in light of the first. The "*disgusting*" and "*shameful*" acts that the wicked man does would be the opposite of the righteous man's love for truth. Since we have already seen that gossip, slander, and false witness are abominations in God's sight, the best interpretation then would be that a wicked man revels in outright deception and lies. He is a person who manufactures "*evidence,*" distorts the truth or bears false witness.

Now life seldom comes easily packaged for our understanding; there are always ambiguities, or misinterpretations; men can sincerely disagree on what happened, and how it happened. But usually, men of good will can sit down together and discuss these things and arrive at some sort of mutual understanding. The wicked man however has his mind made up and nothing will change it. People who refuse to listen to facts, consider evidence, or accept rational arguments show that, at heart, they have no interest in the truth; just in proving their point. And if so, then they are also demonstrating that they are wicked and unregenerate.

Conclusion

Finally, let us consider Proverbs 26:24-26 ***“He who hates disguises it with his lips, but he lays up deceit in his heart. When he speaks graciously, do not believe him, for there are seven abominations in his heart. Though his hatred covers itself with guile, his wickedness will be revealed before the assembly.”***

When wicked men slander the brethren, they seldom do so in overt, nasty attacks. No, they are clever enough to disguise their hatred with “*guile*.” Solomon specifically warns us not to believe this man, not to be “*taken in*” by his deceptive manner. He may flatter us, give us money or gifts, make us feel important by confiding in us; but in all these things he is really trying to manipulate us as another weapon against his intended victim.

If Solomon expects us to recognise these tactics, surely there must be some means to do so? How can we distinguish a legitimate, godly concern from a malicious talebearer full of hatred and wanting to spread strife?

The answer, of course, is in reality a summary of everything we have discussed thus far; wicked men can be identified by the words they speak. Godly men will not slander or gossip (or when they do and are confronted, will repent) while wicked men revel in spreading damaging reports about others. It really is just that simple; if anyone, at any time, comes to us with a negative, derogatory report about another, then they are in sin, pure and simple. And our response ought to be automatic; first, we should say, “*I am sorry, but why are you telling me this?*” and refuse to hear it. Secondly, we must be courageous enough to lovingly confront the person by asking, “*Gossip is sin; have you talked with the accused about this?*” If the gossip comes by email - press the *delete* button.

And if Christians could simply learn how to do these two simple things, we would make great strides in purifying the church and extending the Kingdom. Remember what Jesus said, ***“By this will all men know you are My disciples, if you have love, one for another...”*** Biblical love is the true, defining mark of a regenerate

heart – and through that love, we witness to the world about the risen Christ. The Christian church will never, in this life, be sinless or “*perfect*” because we all fall short of the glory of God. But a powerful church, that transforms lives and successfully defeats His enemies, is one where love is the universal bond.

Gossip, slander and false witness break those bonds and destroy the unity of the church as well as accomplish the enemy's goals for him. We are promised that the gates of hell cannot withstand the onslaught of Christ's church; but what if God's army is torn apart by divisions and factions, the battlefield littered with the wounded from our own infighting? What if the worst enemy we face is not Satan, the hordes of hell, or even his human dupes, but really the agents he has placed within the church to sow gossip and slander and so divide the brethren?

It is time to call gossips, whisperers, back-biters and slanderers what they are: children of hell and use the Biblical means to remove them from our churches. And all that the godly man has to do, to see a great and wonderful victory, is simply refuse to listen to gossip, and gently, but firmly, rebuke those who share it. If Jesus asked you to die for him tomorrow, would you? Of course you would, because in your heart you know that dying for Him is a privilege and honour.

Then my friend, why not **live** for Him today by recognising this great evil in our midst and taking a stand against it? Learn to see gossip for what it is, and those who share it for what they are, and then just refuse to listen to, or read, it! It is my sincere belief that if just a handful of faithful Christians in every church simply refused to listen to gossip, and gently confronted those who “*share*” it, we would experience the greatest revival in church history. The wicked gossips in our midst would be exposed and driven away by truth, the righteous would be protected and encouraged, and the world would see the power of Christ through our love and obedience.

Now, isn't **that** something worth living for?

Other Proverbs for Meditation and Consideration

"An evil man is ensnared by the transgression of his lips, but the righteous will escape from trouble." Proverbs 12:13

"Truthful lips will be established forever, but a lying tongue is only for a moment." Proverbs 12:19

"Discretion will guard you, understanding will watch over you, to deliver you from the way of evil, from the man who speaks perverse things." Proverbs 2:11-12

"Put away from you a deceitful mouth, and put devious lips far from you." Proverbs 4:24

"The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of understanding." Proverbs 10:21

"When there are many words transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise." Proverbs 10:19

"There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing." Proverbs 12:18

"A wicked messenger falls into adversity, but a faithful envoy brings healing." Proverbs 13:17

"In the mouth of the foolish is a rod for his back, but the lips of the wise will preserve them." Proverbs 14:3

"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." Proverbs 15:1

"The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things." Proverbs 15:28

"Righteous lips are the delight of kings, and he who speaks right is loved." Proverbs 16:13

"Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones." Proverbs 16:24

"The beginning of strife is like letting out water, so abandon the quarrel before it breaks out." Proverbs 17:14

"He who restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is counted prudent."

Proverbs 17:27-28

"Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity, than he who is perverse in speech and is a fool." Proverbs 19:1

"He who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards his soul from troubles." Proverbs 21:23

"He who loves purity of heart, and whose speech is gracious, the king is his friend." Proverbs 22:11

"Do not be envious of evil men, nor desire to be with them; for their minds devise violence, and their lips talk trouble." Proverbs 24:1,2

"For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, contention quiets down." Proverbs 26:20

"Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him." Proverbs 29:20

"A truthful witness saves lives, but he who speaks lies is treacherous." Proverbs 14:25

"The tongue of the righteous is as choice silver, the heart of the wicked is worth little." Proverbs 10:20

"He who despises his neighbour lacks sense, but a man of understanding keeps silent." Proverbs 11:12

"He who winks his eyes does so to devise perverse things; he who compresses his lips brings evil to pass." Proverbs 16:30

"The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence." Proverbs 10:11

APPENDIX I:
THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LEARNING
AND INTERPRETING EVIDENCE

Introduction

I debated whether to include this section on judicial process. I have two earned degrees in the social sciences, and have come to be quite skeptical about the role that psychology plays as a counterfeit religion in contemporary culture. Yet, even so, there are many research studies that have been done, studies that can be sustained by good empirical analysis, that are quite important to consider because they have to do with **how** we arrive at conclusions.

First, because we are all a bit leery of modern psychology, let us make a distinction between psychology as a *philosophy* and psychology as an *empirical discipline*. “*Philosophical*” psychology is an alien theology, dangerous to the church, because it begins with unbiblical presuppositions about the nature of man and his problems. Most of the great schools of counselling are basically derived from such a philosophical basis; i.e., Man is an animal (Behaviorism), Man as traumatized by psycho-sexual experiences (Freudianism), Man as Essentially Moral and Good Creature traumatized by Inadequate Socialization (Rogerianism), etc.

However, empirical psychology is an attempt to observe human behaviour, and then using good statistical analysis,

quantify our observations. Over the years, empirical psychologists have developed many such observations about how people learn, how they react to life experiences, etc. that often parallel the Proverbs. Such observations therefore do not have to be a threat to Christian faith or doctrine; to the contrary they can often help us to understand why people act the way they do. Like all good empirical science, the test is always predictability: based on what the researchers have observed, can you then reliably predict what a person **might** do in a given situation? The principles we will examine below have all passed this test.

One of the most basic principles that has been demonstrated time and time again (and one to which we have referred many times in previous chapters) is that no one treats all data equally. Every human being shows selectivity and favoritism towards some data while rejecting other data. This is essentially an empirical verification of Van Til's philosophical maxim that there are no brute facts, only interpreted ones. Thus, when a court of the church tries to evaluate evidence and arrive at a just and fair conclusion, whether they realize it or not, they are just as likely to pay special attention to **some** evidence, and ignore or de-emphasize other evidence. Understanding how these dynamics work will help to ensure that the verdicts we reach are the most rational that we can attain within the limits of our human abilities.

Studies in Cognition: How We Form Ideas and Beliefs

To understand how people form convictions, we first have to take a step back and discuss how people learn in general. Though there are a number of different theories around, most psychologists of learning begin with the term "*schema*." "*Schema*" are essentially "*bis*" of knowledge. Every day, from the time we were born, we are bombarded with information. We have to try to make sense out of this knowledge in order to operate in the world.

Now the human mind is so constructed that there is a limit to

the number of schema we can hold at any one time and this amount varies from individual to individual. From schema, we construct theories or “*paradigms*” of how the world operates. These paradigms become so much a part of our thinking that we no longer have to pay conscious attention to them. For example, learning to drive a car bombards a new driver with a sometimes overwhelming number of schema from traffic lights, oncoming traffic, problems in eye hand coordination, over-steering the car, stepping on the brake or accelerator, etc. After a while though these processes become so ingrained that they are essentially automatic; we have developed a “paradigm” of how to drive and we do not have to consciously think about it - we just do it.

We do the same with every area of life building up paradigms of how we think the world works so we can go to work, do our jobs, shop, cut the grass, etc. We do this with intellectual knowledge and practical knowledge.

The ability to relate schema to schema and develop a good paradigm varies with the individual; some are better at it than others. The real definition of “*intelligence*” may have to do with an inbuilt ability to process schema and develop paradigms that are more closely related to the “*real world.*” In fact, an argument can be made that logic and reason are intellectual tools that were developed to ensure that the deductions made from schema into paradigms are valid. Of course, as Christians, we would argue that logic itself is integral to the nature of the universe because it is a communicable attribute of God.

Anyway you cut it, the acid test of any paradigm is whether it relates to reality; i.e., there is an objective standard by which we can determine whether or not our paradigms are valid. Someone who is “*insane*” is someone whose paradigms do not relate to reality; i.e., he believes that aliens are broadcasting mind control impulses into his brain so he must line his hat with aluminum foil to protect himself from outside influence. But though this kind of problem is at the far end of the spectrum (and may well be caused

by a chemical imbalance in his brain), all of us throughout our lives develop paradigms of how the world works and then adopt behaviors that we think are consistent with that paradigm.

The humanist of course is caught in an epistemological quandary, for his view of reality is hopelessly skewed by his refusal to acknowledge the existence and supremacy of God (Rms 1:18). His only standard of reality is that which fits within the social system he finds himself in. The Christian however knows that God exists and that He has revealed himself in Scripture. Therefore our paradigms can be tested against the nature and being of God, just as physical scientists test their paradigms against the operations of God in the world. It is interesting to note that Materialists, Humanists and Atheist scientists can only verify their paradigms by testing them in the real world, assuming the existence of God's providence even while denying it theoretically.

Moving on with how we develop paradigms, people are not born in isolation, but develop and mature within communities, i.e., family, school, churches, social organization, etc. Therefore all of us tend to adopt the values and paradigms of those communities; (for Biblical support see 1 Cor 15:55). If every human being had to depend just on what he could learn on his own, few children (if any) would learn enough to survive childhood. Borrowing paradigms from others helps us to better assimilate schema and so develop our own paradigms.

Now, depending upon the abilities, insights, etc., of the individual, some people test a given paradigm more than others. Some people, for whatever reason, tend to question the paradigms they inherit to see if they really "*make sense*." Others are more likely to accept the paradigms and organize their schema accordingly. A few people are more likely to be extremely critical of the accepted paradigms and be willing to throw them out and offer brand new ones. If such a person's new paradigm is an actual improvement on the old, then we call him an innovator, or reformer. If his new paradigm is **not** accepted, he is a rebel, a revolutionary and an

outcast.

But no one can live totally outside of all the existing social paradigms. No matter how original a person tries to be, the social values and mores of the community directly affect the individual's interpretation of the schema into specific paradigms. Sometimes people accept or reject certain ideas, not because they are illogical, or contrary to observed facts, but rather because they are contrary to the behavioral implications of that society. For example, there is no question that sexual activity outside of marriage is unhealthy, both physically and psychologically. Yet, in our contemporary, sexually-obsessed culture, young people will often contemptuously disregard abstinence counselling because accepting it would put them outside of the accepted social paradigm that sex outside of marriage is good, healthy, normal and an acceptable part of growing up.

Now, the more diverse the paradigms offered the less commitment the individual will feel to any one paradigm. In sociology, plurality of options inevitably leads to loss of commitment to any one option. Culturally speaking, Western civilization was a monolithic society until the latter decades of the 20th century. While some always found this oppressive (because it limited options), in general the average person was more committed to those few options that were available. Think about this in connection with being a member of a local church; if there is only **one** church in your community, then you tend to be more committed to that church, despite its flaws. But if there are many churches, people tend to wander from fellowship to fellowship.

With the social revolution in the 1960's, all of a sudden there was a plethora of social paradigms available. As a consequence people lost a great deal of commitment to their religion, their home-town, their educational alternatives, their work, etc.

To a certain degree, the world is more complex than many of us give it credit for being. And some of the paradigms we construct are inadequate either because we cannot handle the multitude of

schema that is coming at us at a given time, or we cannot relate the schema adequately together into a workable paradigm. When this happens, people at best are frustrated, unproductive and feel like failures; at worst it can lead to “*nervous breakdowns*,” depression, angst and even suicidal thoughts.

Even if we do have the ability to handle schema adequately and develop realistic paradigms, there are still social and psychological factors that may cause us to adopt or maintain paradigms even if they do not reflect reality; Romans 1:18 wherein men suppress the truth in unrighteousness, might be an example of refusing to acknowledge the truth and adopt a new paradigm.

The paradigms we have generate a profound effect on our ability to properly interpret new schema, because they basically act like a filter or grid by which we interpret everything else. For example, there is a tendency to select data that confirms our paradigm, and to reject data that contradicts it; in other words, “*my mind is made up, don't confuse me with the facts.*” There is also a tendency to assimilate conflicting data into an existing paradigm, rather than junk the paradigm and create a new one that adequately deals with the new schema. What this means is that even if we receive new schema that would nullify the old paradigm, we tend to find some way of incorporating the data any way, despite the fact that it is contradictory. Like the Red Queen in Alice in Wonderland, we are awfully good at believing six impossible things before breakfast.

Reality though has a habit of destroying inadequate paradigms. When the old ideas no longer meet the demands of a new situation (i.e., there is discrepant data; see Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*), then we are forced to radically change our paradigms. In scientific terms, this can often lead to genuine progress since the new data is so overwhelming that the old paradigm just cannot hold up any longer and with the new paradigm we gain a better handle on how the “*real world*” actually operates. Slowly, the older generation of scholars dies off and a

new generation, holding to the new paradigm, takes their place.

However, what determines “*discrepant*” data? In the scientific world it could be that there are genuine new discoveries that overturn the old paradigms. For example meat sealed in a bottle does not generate maggots, hence there is no spontaneous generation of life. However, it could be that the “*discrepant*” data is simply data that does not fit with our own underlying presuppositions. We do not want the world to act in a certain way, so, like the pagans in Romans 1:18, we suppress the truth because it would force us to change in ways we would rather not.

Psychology and the Interpretation of Evidence

Now how do all of the above factors affect our ability to wisely and justly evaluate evidence? Often evidence is accepted, not because it has been proved, but because it fits within our currently existing paradigms. In most ecclesiastical court cases, both the accused and his accusers are probably known to the court. Everyone already has opinions about the personalities, gifts, weaknesses of both parties. Thus, rather than basing a decision solely on the evidence before it, the court's preconceived ideas influence what is even considered a “*fact*.”

Since we tend to accept evidence that supports our paradigm, and subject evidence that would over-turn it to harsher scrutiny; if the court is not careful, they may well reject good, sound evidence simply because it does not fit in with their expectations. The elders are all **sincere** in their conviction, but in reality their conviction is based, not on all the evidence, but only on that which confirms their pre-existing beliefs. This is one of the reasons why it is so crucial for a court to carefully separate its investigative functions from its adjudication duties. If the court as a whole has already concluded that the accused is guilty, **before** hearing his side of the story, how can he realistically ever be expected to defend himself when his case comes to trial? The court has already made up its mind that it is highly probable that he **is** guilty and then they are

likely to pay close attention to any evidence that confirms their belief, and to discount, ignore or under-value any evidence that would require them to change their verdict.

Furthermore, all men may well have various emotional or psychological agendas that interpret what data they receive and what they reject. There is no way around this because we are all products of our life-experiences. Because of social pressure (conformity behaviour discussed earlier) some people on the court may have strong opinions about the accused even before the investigation begins. Then, those who do **not** have a particular opinion find themselves influenced by the strong opinions of others. Once the group has established a particular “*mind-set*” it takes an exceptional individual to go against the dominant view.

And once the group has developed a particular mind-set they can always rationalize why that mind-set is justified, appropriate, rational, fair, etc., because we all tend to put our actions in the best light possible. We can attune to those facts that support the rightness of our actions, and simply ignore any that would cause us to question them. What this means is that a man can be convicted, before the trial ever begins, with no realistic hope that **anything** he says, or any evidence he presents, will overturn the court's negative predisposition.

Conclusion

Most Reformed theologians and philosophers (including the great ones like Van Til) assume that ideas are everything, and if only you can get someone to adopt the “*right*” ideas, then you can change them. We have a long and valued tradition of rational discourse regarding the Scriptures and the best defined creeds in the history of Christendom. The average elder serving on a church court **assumes** that he is well equipped to deal with a problem, given some common-sense and a fair hearing.

However, if the above analysis from the psychology of learning holds up, the very reason why certain evidence is rejected, and

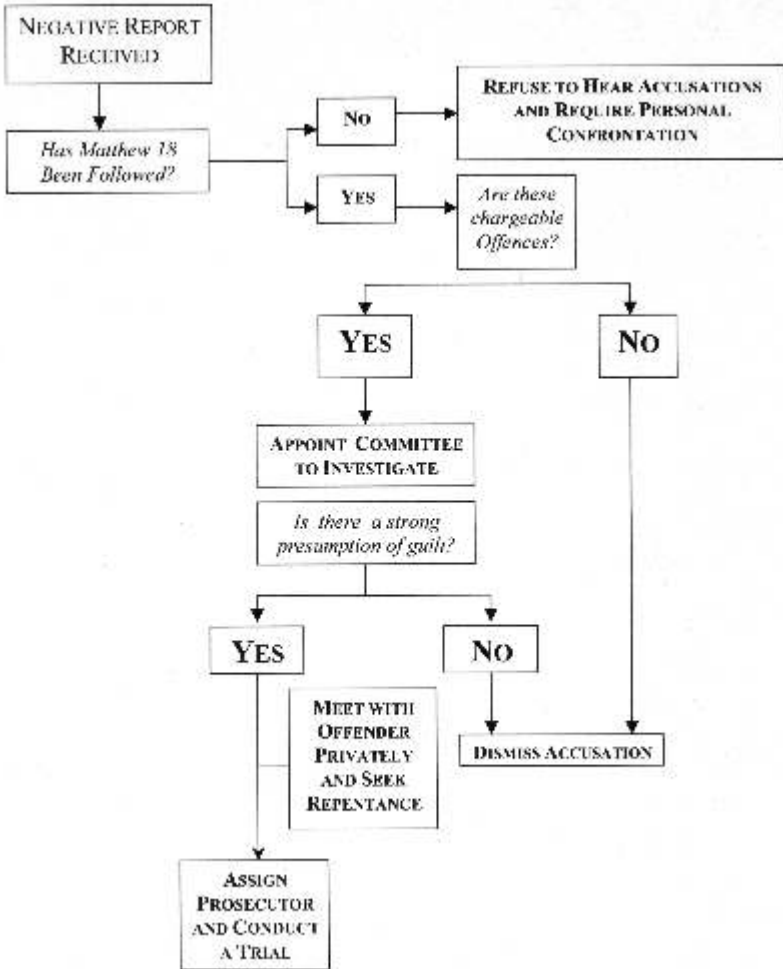
other evidence accepted, may have little to do with its actual value, but rather by what happens before the trial ever takes place. If godly men are unaware of these psychological dynamics, then they can adjudicate cases on the basis of certain paradigms or group dynamics, rather than on the evidence itself. And when that happens, the church has ceased to speak with the objective authority of God's Law, and replaced it with the subjective feelings of men.

What we believe affects what we do; ideas do have consequences; but those ideas do not arise in a vacuum. Often the conclusions we reach about any area of life may be greatly influenced by the environmental and social forces around us, rather than a rational analysis of the facts. For Christians to exchange the tools of a reasoned approach to the Scriptures and life, and replace it with “*inner*” subjective convictions, is to lose one of the distinguishing marks of the church; effective discipline.

Hence understanding those psychological and sociological factors that influence **how** we evaluate evidence helps us understand what blinders we ourselves bring to the situation as well as understanding why certain people form the conclusions they do. We *can* reason better, and make better judgments. We *can* give justice and so be like our Heavenly Father. But if we do not understand how we can be misled by our paradigms, if we think that sincerity is a substitute for truth, then we bring disgrace to the Gospel, invalidate our witness and bring God's judgments on our churches.

APPENDIX II

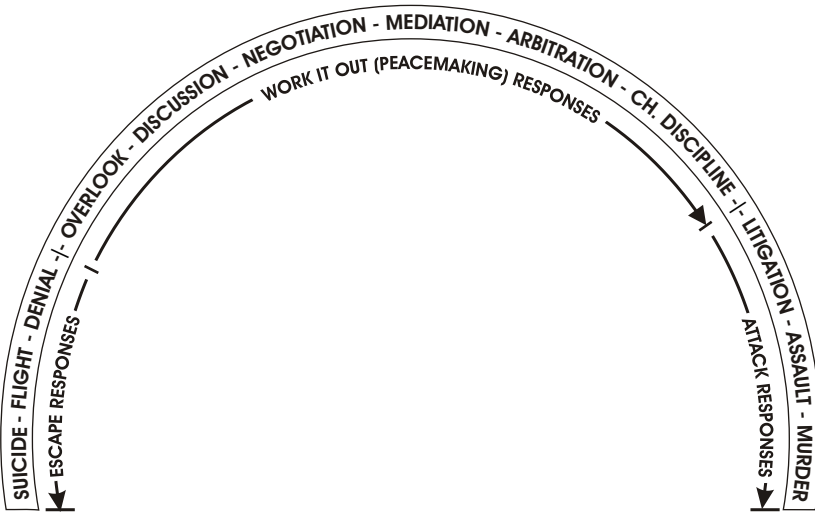
FLOW CHART ILLUSTRATING CHURCH
PROCEDURE ON RECEIVING A NEGATIVE REPORT



APPENDIX III
*OUTLINE OF THE PROCESS
OF AN ECCLESIASTICAL TRIAL*

1. An accusation comes before the court.
2. The first determination is whether Matthew 18:15ff has been followed by the accuser(s).
 - a. If so, then a committee is appointed to investigate whether this is a chargeable offense according to the Moral Law.
 - b. If not, the accuser is sent back to the accused.
3. If investigative committee determines that there has been a possible violation of the Moral Law and strong credible evidence of guilt:
 - a. The Court appoints a Prosecutor, or the individual making the accusation assumes the role of prosecutor.
 - b. To prevent bias or prejudice, the committee investigating the charge may serve as prosecutor but can not serve also as one of the judges.
4. The Prosecutor calls witnesses, or presents evidence, to prove the accusations.
5. The Defence cross-examines the witnesses or presents counter-evidence.
6. The Court evaluates the evidence and the credibility of Witnesses.
7. The Court determines whether guilt has been proven.
8. The Court determines the appropriate Biblical sanctions.

APPENDIX VI
HOW DO PEOPLE TYPICALLY
RESPOND TO CONFLICT?



**The Slippery Slope:
A Spectrum of Responses to Conflict**

Responding to Conflict Biblically

Peacemaker Seminar audio and video tape sets

Peacemaker Ministries

537 Avenue D, Suite 352, Billings, MT 59102, USA

Tel: 406-256-1583 Fax: 406-256-0001

Web: www.HisPeace.org Email: mail@HisPeace.org

Responses to Conflict in the Bible

Indicate which response to conflict was used and whether it was wise (" + ") or foolish /sinful (" - ")

1. Abraham's response to the friction between Sarai and Hagar (Gen. 16:6).
 2. Hagar's response to Sarai's persecution (Gen. 16:6-8).
 3. Joseph's response when Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him (Gen. 39:11-12).
 4. Potiphar's wife's response when Joseph spurned her advances (Gen. 39:13-18).
 5. Pharaoh's response to the plagues God brought upon him (Ex. 7:1 - 12:36).
 6. Saul's response to David when he won the hearts of the people (1 Sam. 18:1-16).
 7. David's response to Saul's attempts to kill him (1 Sam. 19:9-12).
 8. Solomon's response to the dispute over the prostitute's baby (1 Kings 3:16-28).
 9. Daniel's response to the command to eat unclean food (Dan. 1:8-16).
 10. Jonah's response to God's command to go to Nineveh (Jonah 1:3).
 11. Joseph's response when Herod was searching for Jesus (Matt. 2:13 -15).
 12. Judas Iscariot's response to the inner conflict he felt after betraying the Lord (Matt. 27:5).
 13. The Corinthians' response to legal conflicts with one another (1 Cor. 6:1-8).
 14. The apostles' response to the conflict about distributing food (Acts 6:1-7).
 15. Barnabas' response to the conflict between Saul and the apostles (Acts 9:26-28).
 16. Peter's response when Jewish Christians complained about teaching Gentiles (Acts 11: 1-18).
 17. The Philippian slave owners' response to Paul (Acts 16:16-22).
 18. Paul's response to Peter's support of the circumcision group (Acts 15:1-29; Gal. 2:11-21).
 19. Paul's response when charged with crimes in Jerusalem (Acts 24:1-26:32).
 20. The Pharisees' response to Jesus.
- Bonus: God's response to our sin (the Gospel).

(See answers on next page)

Responses to Conflict in the Bible

Answers to the situations described on previous page

Note: Because the Bible does not give detailed information about some of these situations, it is not always clear whether a particular response was wise or foolish.

1. Abraham's response to the friction between Sarai and Hagar (Gen. 16:6): Denial combined with half-hearted arbitration; foolish.

2. Hagar's response to Sarai's persecution (Gen. 16:6-8): Flight, foolish.

3. Joseph's response when Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him (Gen. 39:11-12): Flight; wise.

4. Potiphar's wife's response when Joseph spurned her advances (Gen. 39:13-18): Assault, apparently combined with pressing false legal charges; foolish.

5. Pharaoh's response to the plagues God brought upon him (Ex. 7:1-12:36): Denial; foolish

6. Saul's response to David when he won the hearts of the people (1 Sam. 18:1-16): Assault and attempted murder; foolish.

7. David's response to Saul's attempts to kill him (1 Sam. 19:9,12): Flight; wise (David ran away to avoid a direct confrontation with Saul.)

8. Solomon's response to the dispute over the prostitute's baby (1 Kings 3:16-28): Arbitration or Litigation (decision by the civil authority); wise.

9. Daniel's response to the command to eat unclean food (Dan. 1:8-16): Negotiation; wise (This is one of the best examples of collaborative negotiation in the Bible, see *The Peacemaker*, pp. 191-2.)

10. Jonah's response to God's command to go to Nineveh (Jonah 1:3): His first response was flight, which was foolish, and then he essentially acquiesced to his own death (Jonah 2:1), which was tantamount to suicide; again foolish. After he repented, he listened to God (discussion), but then he again fell into denial and a wish for death (Jonah 4:1-9).

11. Joseph's response when Herod was searching for Jesus (Matt. 2:13-15): Flight; wise.

12. Judas Iscariot's response to the inner conflict he felt after betraying the Lord (Matt. 27:5): Suicide; foolish.

13. The Corinthians' response to conflicts with one another (1 Cor. 6:1-8): Litigation; foolish.

14. The apostles' response to the conflict about distributing food (Acts 6:1-7): Mediation and/or Arbitration (their proposed solution "pleased the whole group;" it is unclear whether it was merely a suggestion or a binding decision); wise (good leaders build consensus rather than impose solutions).

15. Barnabas's response to the conflict between Saul and the apostles (Acts 9:26-28). Mediation; wise.

16. Peter's response when Jewish Christians complained about teaching Gentiles (Acts 11:1-18): Discussion and Negotiation; wise.

17. The Philippian slave owners' response when Paul's delivered the woman from spiritual bondage (Acts 16:22-40); Litigation (unjust use of civil processes), resulting in assault; foolish.

18. Paul's response to Peter's support of circumcision group (Acts 15:1-29; Gal. 2:11,2 1): Discussion, followed by an appeal to church arbitration and discipline (council at Jerusalem); wise.

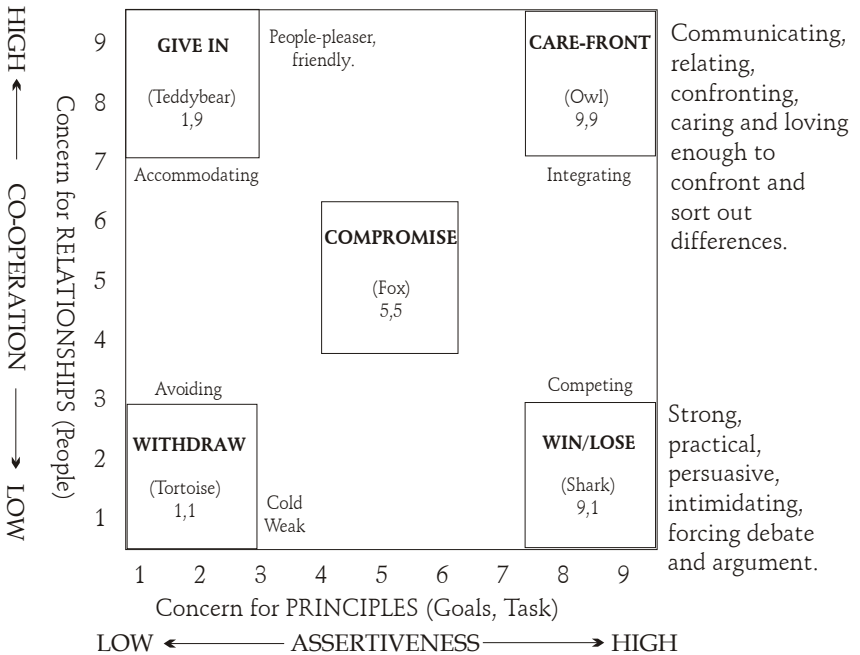
19. Paul's response when charged with crimes in Jerusalem (Acts 24:1-26:32); Discussion (tried to reason with crowd), with final resort to litigation (civil authorities) after a deliberate choice to bypass church courts, which were stacked against him; wise.

20. The Pharisees' response to Jesus: Initially, they tried to discuss their differences with Jesus, not so much to understand and reason with Him, but to trap Him. In the end they arrested Him and dragged Him before a corrupt church court (perverted church discipline), then took Him before a corrupt civil ruler (unjust litigation), then joined in a general assault against Him (verbal and physical), and finally instigated His murder. All that they did was foolish and sinful. Only Nicodemus responded properly to Christ (discussion leading to conversion).

Bonus: God's response to our sin (the Gospel). God bears with our sin with great patience (Ps. 103:10-18; Rom. 9:22-24), offering and securing for us eternal forgiveness in spite of our many offenses against Him. The cost for this mercy was immeasurably great, however. God sent His Son to serve both as a mediator (1 Tim. 2:5) and as our substitute to work out a resolution to the greatest conflict the world has ever known. Jesus willingly went on trial in our place, was convicted for our sins (2 Cor. 5:2 1), and suffered the flogging, death, and separation that we deserved (Mark 15:34). The Gospel is the most wonderful response to conflict that has ever occurred, but to bring it about, Jesus had to choose the most painful response to conflict that could ever be imagined.

APPENDIX VII HANDLING CONFLICT

The various reactions of people to conflicts, crisis, arguments and differences can best be illustrated by means of a graph. Where do you fit in?



Types of Conflict Management	Assumptions Behind Each Style	Situations In Which This Style of Handling Conflict Would Be Best
WITHDRAW (1,1)	Differences are eternal, inevitable, unchangeable. Differences are bad.	1) When you have no power. 2) Damage of confrontation too great. 3) The issue is trivial.
WIN/LOSE (9,1)	Differences are black and white, someone is right. Differences need to be erased.	1) When time is short. 2) Principles are of crucial importance. 3) You don't want to be taken advantage of.
GIVE IN (1,9)	Differences drive people apart because they are personal attacks - conflict calls for sacrifice and yielding.	1) When you are wrong. 2) Building credit for future. 3) You have low power or desire harmony. 4) Willing to let others learn by mistakes.
COMPROMISE (5,5)	Differences must be seen in the light of common good. Should be aired - then give and take. Split the difference.	1) When goals are moderately important. 2) When participants have equal power. 3) A permanent settlement would be complex 4) Time is a factor.
CARE-FRONTING (9,9)	Differences are natural, neutral, and normal; occasions for creative problem solving.	1) When both sets of concerns are too important. 2) Commitment to principles and/or each other. 3) Where learning is important.

* IT IS MORE IMPORTANT TO STRIVE FOR UNDERSTANDING THAN AGREEMENT

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."
Matthew 18: 15 - 16

"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the Law of Christ."
Galatians 6: 1-2

APPENDIX VIII
The Bible on Slander

"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour." Exodus 20:15

"Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness." Exodus 23:1

"Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour's life. I am the Lord. Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbour frankly..." Leviticus 19:16-17

"The first to present his case seems right until another comes forward and questions him." Proverbs 18:17

"He who answers before listening – that is his folly and his shame." Proverbs 18:13

"A perverse man stirs up dissension and a gossip separates close friends." Proverbs 16:28

"It is to a man's honour to avoid strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel." Proverbs 20:3

"A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much." Proverbs 20:19

"Drive out the mocker and out goes strife; quarrels and insults are ended." Proverbs 22: 10

"Do not testify against your neighbour without cause, or use your lips to deceive." Proverbs 24:28

"What you have seen with your eyes do not bring hastily to court, for what will you do in the end if your neighbour puts you to shame? If you argue your case with a neighbour, do not betray another man's confidence, or he who hears it may shame you and you will never lose your bad reputation." Proverbs 25. 8-10

"Like one who seizes a dog by the ears is a passer-by who meddles in a quarrel not his own." Proverbs 26: 17

"An angry man stirs up dissension." Proverbs 29:22

"A truthful witness gives honest testimony, but a false witness tells lies."
Proverbs 12:17

"He who guards his lips guards his soul, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin."
Proverbs 13:3

"A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who pours out lies will perish."
Proverbs 19:9

"Like a club or a sword or a sharp arrow is the man who gives false testimony against his neighbour."
Proverbs 25:18

"Whoever slanders his neighbour in secret, him will I put to silence..."
Psalm 101:5

"He who conceals his hatred has lying lips, and whoever spreads slander is a fool."
Proverbs 10:18

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander along with every form of malice."
Ephesians 4:31

"Remind the people to ... slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men."
Titus 3: 1-2

"The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire and is itself set on fire by hell."
James 3:6

"Therefore rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander of every kind."
1 Peter 2:1

"One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offence he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse a man of a crime, the two men involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the Lord before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time. The judges must make a thorough investigation and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, you must purge the evil from among you. The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you."

Deuteronomy 19: 15-20

CHARACTER ASSASSINS
Dealing With Ecclesiastical Tyrants
and Terrorists


Bibliography

Delighting God

by Dr. James Kennedy, Vine Books, 1993

How to be Free From Bitterness

by Jim Wilson, Canon Press, 1992

On Being a Missionary

by Dr. Thomas Hale, William Carey Library, 1995

Responding to Conflict Biblically

Peacemaker Seminar audio and Video Tape Sets

Peacemaker Ministries

PO Box 81130, Billings, MT 59108, USA

Tel: 406/256-1583 Fax: 406/256-0001

Web: www.HisPeace.org Email: mail@HisPeace.org

The Greatest Century of Missions

by Dr. Peter Hammond, CLB, 2002

The Peacemaker

by Ken Sande, Baker, 1997

The Wounded Minister - Healing from and Preventing Personal Attacks

by Dr. Guy Greenfield, Baker, 2002

Other Publications

Other Publications Available from Christian Liberty Books

Biblical Principles for Africa
Biblical Worldview Manual
David Livingstone - Man of Prayer and Action
Discipleship Handbook
Faith Under Fire in Sudan
Fight For Life - a Pro-Life Handbook
Finding Freedom from the Pornography Plague
Going Through ... Even if the Door is Closed
Great Commission Manual
Greatest Century of Missions
Greatest Century of Reformation
Holocaust in Rwanda (also translated into French)
In the Killing Fields of Mozambique
Make a Difference - a Christian Action Handbook for Southern Africa
Putting Feet to Your Faith
South Africa - Renaissance or Reformation?
Security and Survival in Unstable Times
Shooting Back - The Right and Duty of Self-Defence
The Christian at War (also translated into Spanish, German and Afrikaans)
The Christian Voice of Southern Africa
The Doctor Comes to Lui
The Pink Agenda - Sexual Revolution and The Ruin of the Family
The Reformation Conference Manual

Audio Tape Sets

The Biblical Worldview Seminar	(12 x 90 minute audio tapes & manual)
The Great Commission Course	(12 x 90 minute audio tapes & manual)
Muslim Evangelism Workshop	(4 x 90 minute audio tapes & manual)
The Reformation Conference	(6 x 90 minute audio tapes & manual)
The Summit	(12 x 90 minute audio tapes & textbook)

For a catalogue, please write to:



Christian Liberty Books

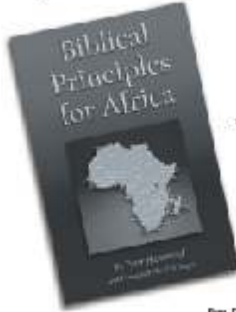
P O Box 358, Howard Place, 7450, Cape Town, South Africa
Tel/Fax: +27-21-689-7478 Email: admin@frontline.org.za
Web: www.christianlibertybooks.co.za



Christian Liberty Books

P O Box 358, Howard Place, 7450, Cape Town, South Africa
 Tel/Fax: +27+21 689 7478 Email: admin@frontline.org.za
 Web: www.christianlibertybooks.co.za

Hope for Africa - REFORMATION and TRANSFORMATION



"Wonderful"
 Tony Mwanuzi
 President of the
 Republic of Zambia

"A challenge"
 Bishop Frank Latta, Dealing Bishop,
 Church of England in South Africa

"An awesome job-book"
 Mrs. Cheryl Reddy, M.B.

"Highly recommended"
 Bishop Rufus A. Dool, Lead Bishop,
 "The Anglican Church of Southern Africa"

"A manual on the way of blessing"
 Rev Eric Jeyaraj, Director of Evangelism Mission

"Constructively proactive"
 Michael Comby,
 Executive of African Enterprise

"Blessings"
 Rev. Dr. E. S. Mofokeng, M.B.

"Comprehensive yet concise"
 Hon. East. Des. M.L.E. Just Anderson II
 High Commissioner for South Africa
 to the Court of St. Francis, London

A powerful, authoritative tool for parents, teachers, businessmen and government officials, this compact 300 page book presents tried and tested power principles that lead to protection of the innocent, progress and prosperity.

LEADERSHIP TRAINING COURSES

Life changing audio tapes and manuals

Biblical Worldview Seminar
 Tape Set: (12 x 90min, 23 lectures)
 Manual: (80 pages)

Understand the times and know how to effectively explain what you believe and why you believe.

The Summit Course
 Tape Set: (12 x 90min, 24 lectures)

Great Commission Course
 Tape Set: (12 x 90min, 24 lectures)
 Manual: (70 pages)

Be equipped to put feet to your faith and make Christ's Great Commission your supreme ambition.



Apply the Lordship of Christ in all areas of life.



Muslim Evangelism Workshop
 Tape Set: (4 x 90 min, 8 lectures)
 Manual: (32 pages)

Do you know how to witness to your Muslim neighbours? This workshop manual & tapes will help you to understand Islam & equip you practically with the information you need to be effective.



Reformation Conference
 Tape Set: (8 x 90 min, 14 lectures)
 Manual: (70 pages)



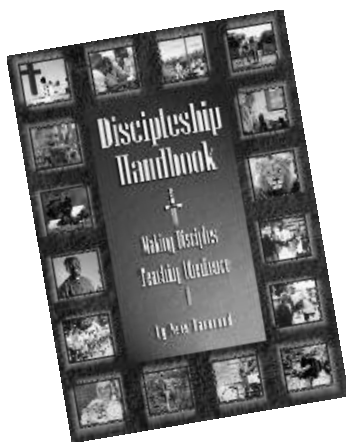
Do you want God to bless South Africa? We need to rediscover the dynamic doctrines and devotion of those Reformers whom God used to change their world.



Other titles available from Christian Liberty Books

If ordering from the USA - please contact:
 In Touch Mission International
 Mail to: PO Box 7575, Tempe, AZ 85281
 Email: itmi@intouchmissions.org
 Toll Free: 1-888-918-4100
 ITMI is able to accept Mastercard & Visa

Discipleship Handbook



"... strong Biblical content ... historical depth ... a spiritual road-map for 21st Century believers."

Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World*, England

"... Comprehensive guide to discipleship..."
Jerry Newcombe, Co-author, *What if Jesus Had Never Been Born?*

"... this Discipleship Handbook will be a blessing to those who want to change lives and change this world." Eugene M. Kalunga, Principal, Excellence Christian Academy, Zambia

"The Discipleship Handbook is concise, power packed ... the real thing."

Hedd Thomas, Missionary, Kenya

"The Discipleship Handbook is highly practical, very positive,... This book will rekindle the smoldering fires of devotion that have burned low for too long."

Rev. Bill Bathman, President, ITMI, author of *Going Through*

"... skilled in discipleship ... practical experience."

Dr. Chris Parnell, past President of the Baptist Union of Southern Africa

"Read this book. It is about basic Christianity, about believing it and living it. Nothing is more important than this, ..."

Father Arthur Lewis, Retired Church of England missionary

Frontline Fellowship

Phone: +27+21-689-7478

Email: admin@christianlibertybooks.co.za

Web: <http://www.frontline.org.za>



Do You want to Change Your World?

**Put Feet to Your Faith!
attend...**



The Great Commission Course

Is the Great Commission your supreme ambition?

Plan now to attend this uniquely practical missionary course designed for all those who desire to be more innovative and effective in cross cultural evangelism and discipleship. This intensive missions training camp includes excellent and experienced missionary speakers, hands-on practicals, workshops, films, daily outreaches and more!

The last command of Christ should be your first concern.

Give up your small ambitions - and follow Christ!



For information or to register contact:

Frontline Fellowship
PO Box 74, Newlands, 7725,
Cape Town, South Africa
Tel: +27+21-689-4480
Fax: +27+21-685-5884
Email: admin@frontline.org.za
Web: www.frontline.org.za

About the Authors

Brian Abshire

After serving with the United States Air Force, **Dr. Brian Abshire** graduated from Bethel College (*Magna Cum Laude*) in two years, with a double major in Psychology and Biblical and Theological Studies. He attended Bethel, Talbot, International and Covenant Seminaries, eventually earning an MA (*Summa Cum Laude*) in Apologetics and Contemporary Culture and a Th.M. (*Magna Cum Laude*) in Presuppositional Apologetics. His Ph.D. dissertation was on the Sociological Effects of New England Puritanism on the Development of American Cultural Values.

Brian has served as a Biblical counselor, lecturer in theology, youth, singles, young married and senior pastor. He has had the honor of teaching across the world from Australia to Zambia on the practical application of Biblical principles to social and cultural issues.

He is presently the senior Teaching Elder at Highlands Reformed Presbyterian Church (RPCUS), Spokane, WA, USA. He is the author of "*Get More from Your Bible*," "*Discipleship and Biblical Counseling*," "*The Church as God's Army*," and a new series of books entitled "*Restoring the Christian Life*." For a number of years he served with the Chalcedon Foundation both on the Board of Trustees as well as a resident scholar writing a monthly column entitled "*Counter-Cultural Christianity*."

Along with his pastoral duties at Highlands Reformed, Brian also works as the Director for the International Institute for Christian Culture and serves as Professor of Comparative Religion at Whitefield College. In his spare time, he edits "*Taking the High-Ground*" a monthly theological journal dealing with restoring Christian culture.

Brian is fifty years old, has been married to a beautiful, gracious and godly woman for 26 years and has six children - all home-schooled.

Peter Hammond

For over 22 years, **Dr. Peter Hammond** has pioneered missionary outreaches into the war zones of Mozambique, Angola and Sudan. Often travelling by off road motorbike, Peter has travelled hundreds of thousands of kilometres to deliver Bibles to persecuted Christians in Africa and Eastern Europe. In the course of his missionary activities, Peter has been ambushed, come under aerial and artillery bombardments, been stabbed, shot at, beaten by mobs, arrested and imprisoned.

Rev. Peter Hammond is the Founder and Director of Frontline Fellowship, the Founder and Chairman of Africa Christian Action and the Director of the Christian Action Network. He is the author of *Faith Under Fire In Sudan, Holocaust In Rwanda, In the Killing Fields of Mozambique, Putting Feet To Your Faith, The Greatest Century of Missions, Biblical Principles For Africa* and *The Discipleship Handbook*. He is also the Editor of both *Frontline Fellowship News* and the *Christian Action* magazine.

Peter has developed the Biblical Worldview Seminar and Great Commission Course to mobilise churches to comprehensively apply the Lordship of Christ to all areas of life.

In his desire to apply the Lordship of Christ to all areas of life, Peter has been actively involved in numerous social issues. Since 1991 he has been vigorously promoting the Pro-Life cause in South Africa, initiating and mobilising the annual *Life Chains, Sanctity Life Sunday* and *National Day of Repentance*. He has mobilised numerous marches to Parliament, including the Christian Voice marches in 1995 and 1996 which mobilised over 30 000 Christians in protest against the planned new secular state and its constitutional approval of abortion, pornography and other social evils. Peter has regularly been called upon to present submissions to various sub-committees at Parliament. He has co-authored or contributed to various books dealing with social issues in South Africa including: *Fight For Life - A Pro-life Handbook for Southern Africa; Make a Difference - A Christian Action Handbook for Southern Africa; South Africa - Renaissance or Reformation?*; *Finding Freedom From The Pornography Plague* and *The Pink Agenda - Sexual Revolution and the Ruin of the Family in South Africa*.

Peter and his lovely wife, Lenora, home school their four children.

Bill Bathman

Rev. Bill Bathman is a missionary evangelist. He lived in Europe for 22 years where his primary concentration for evangelism was the communist countries of Eastern Europe. He distributed New Testaments to Soviet soldiers as they invaded Czechoslovakia in August 1968 and was preaching in Romania at the time of the Revolution in 1989.

His insights into current events are enhanced by his extensive travel to more than 100 countries during the last 53 years of ministry. For ten years he hosted a daily radio program and for over 20 years was the editor of a monthly geo-strategic newsletter, *Global Glance*. He is the author of, “*Angola by the Back Door*” and “*Going Through...Even if The Door is Closed*”, a personal account of his missionary experiences behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War years.

In 2001 Bill and his wife, Harriett, moved to Cape Town, South Africa and continue to work in restricted-access countries across the Dark Continent.

Bill is the Founder and President of In Touch Mission International and is widely regarded as a missionary statesman.

Bill and Harriett Bathman have three daughters, ten grandchildren and one great grandchild.