

The Pastor and his Use of the Eighth Commandment

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An essay on the pastor and the Eighth Commandment was suggested to our conference program committee a couple years ago. The suggestion did not come because it was felt that pastors are violating this commandment more than any of the others. The suggestion came because of feelings sometimes expressed by pastors if and when their members contact a circuit pastor or district president about a matter involving their pastor or congregation.

Every now and then a pastor will say that if the member did not first talk to his pastor about the matter and/or notify his pastor about this contact beyond the parish, it was almost certainly a violation of the Eighth Commandment. Furthermore pastors are sometimes heard saying that the circuit pastor or district president is guilty of condoning and encouraging the lay person to commit this sin by continuing conversations with lay people without first checking as to whether or not the pastor was informed of the matter and of the parishioner's intention to contact the circuit pastor or district president.

Obviously, the circuit pastors and district presidents involved did not feel that way. They also felt that pastors are sometimes perhaps guilty of "hiding" behind the Eighth Commandment, because every now and then pastors will say that until a parishioner observes the Eighth Commandment according to their (i.e. pastors') interpretation, their parishioner's concerns are not worthy of a pastor's consideration; and if the concerns expressed by the circuit pastor or district president are based on information the parishioner gave them but did not give his pastor, then it is hearsay and also not worthy of the pastor's consideration.

That is mentioned because one might expect an essay on the pastor and the Eighth Commandment to be rather general and far-ranging in scope, whereas what follows will be rather narrow and specific in scope. It will, in the main, be limited to the "controversy" or issue just described.

Before we get to that however, and to help us better understand it, allow me to make a few comments on the pastor and his role as a Catechism instructor.

I.

A problem common to all pastors in their role as Catechism instructors is covering all the material. Most (if not all) of us have places in the Catechism where we spend more time, proceed more slowly, and go into more depth than we do in other places. The list of places may vary somewhat from one pastor to the next, but it is quite likely that some or all of the following would appear somewhere on our lists: Commandments Four through Six, God's work of creation, church fellowship, the mission of the Church, and the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible.

It is good that we do that. Sexual permissiveness, substance abuse, abortion, evolution, debate on the mission of the Church, and disregard for civil and biblical authority are popular, compelling issues today. If our youth catechumens have not already faced those issues, they will begin doing so within a short time after they leave our Catechism classes.

They need to be fortified for those encounters. Their faith will need a base of some breadth and depth if it is to stand. The pressure those young confirmands will experience to experiment with sex and drugs, to evaluate the teachings and programs of their church, and to disregard authority will be great—far greater than we can, in some instances, really imagine.

By the same token we might be inclined to lightly pass over the Eighth Commandment. Not that we skip it entirely, but it might seem that here is a place where we can make up for some of the ground and time we “lost” in covering some of those areas just mentioned. After all, our youth catechumens come to us knowing it is a sin to say things about another person that are not true, because that is lying. They also know that saying something bad about another person is wrong, even if what is said is true; because from young on children have heard the old adage that if you cannot say something nice about a person, you should not say anything at all.

People who lived a generation or two ago knew about lying and name-calling, and they knew those things were wrong. Yet gossip and tale-bearing were very popular then—so popular, in fact, that pastors of that era frequently referred to sins against the Eighth Commandment as the favorite indoor sport of people everywhere.

Professional baseball and football promoters will tell us their sports occupy that position today because of radio and television. Producers of computer and other video games might make the same claim. But one can make an equally strong case for gossip, name-calling, slander, defamation of character, etc. They have not really waned in popularity from our parents’ generation to ours.

The reason is that such things are attractive and tempting to human nature. Martin Luther was not the first to detect and make note of that, but in his *Large Catechism* he put his finger on it as well as anyone has: “Everyone would ...that all the world should speak of him in terms of gold, but we cannot bear that the best is spoken of others .” (I, 264)

Call it pride. Call it jealousy. Human nature likes to look good beside others. Better yet, human nature likes to look better than anyone else.

In addition to being very tempting, sins against the Eighth Commandment are also very destructive. We have experienced that in our personal lives, and we have certainly seen how gossip, slander, etc. on a congregation’s “grapevine” can divide a congregation and curtail its work.

Pity the pastor who has to try to head off rumors, get people out of one another’s hair, and otherwise repel and repair the damage caused by rumor and name-calling. It will take up a great deal of a pastor’s time, and it will prove to be extremely frustrating to him, because one piece of gossip leads to another, and the old adage about sticks, stones, bones, and words really is not true. Tale-bearing and secret-telling do inflict wounds, and seldom do those wounds deal easily or completely.

It follows, then, that while it may be tempting for the pastor in his role as Catechism instructor to quickly pass over the Eighth Commandment, it is and will prove to be an ill-advised move. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. The pastor who gives the Eighth Commandment its due in his instruction classes is taking measures which, under God, will help maintain congregation unity and harmony. That, in turn, will help assure that more of his already limited time and effort and that of his par parishioners will be available for making and keeping people heirs of God, rather than getting and keeping them out of one another’s hair.

There is not only much in the way of reason to dwell on the Eighth Commandment in our instruction classes. There is also much in the way of content to impart. That is immediately apparent as one again reads through Martin Luther’s exposition of this commandment in the *Large Catechism*.

Luther believed and taught, as we do, that it is a sin to make testimony against our neighbor when we have not first presented that person with the testimony. Yet Luther pointed out

this commandment does not forbid us to ever make testimony against our neighbor; nor does it ban us from doing that unless we have first made that testimony to our neighbor.

Take a situation in which one of our neighbors is saying things about another of our neighbors that are not true, or is making charges in court that are not true. That has the potential for damaging our second neighbors reputation and eroding his integrity. Luther wrote:

God wishes the reputation, good name, and upright character of our neighbor to be taken away or diminished as little as his money and possessions, that everyone may stand in his integrity before wife, children, servants, and neighbors... For it is intolerable to live among men in open shame and contempt.” (I, 256, 255)

That being the case, Luther says we are obligated to set the record straight:

In the first place, we take the plainest meaning of this commandment ...as pertaining to the public courts of justice, where a poor innocent man is accused and oppressed by false witnesses in order to be punished in his body, property, or honor. (I, 257)

There, Luther said, a judge and witnesses are needed, and that the people most qualified to fill those roles are godly people.

Dr. Luther was right, because God says: “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves...Defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:8f.). And again: “(Love) always protects...” (I Corinthians 13:7).

That, of course, means that we will end up testifying or giving witness against the accusing neighbor. We certainly may first testify *to* the accusing neighbor before we testify *against* him, but are we always bound to do so? Are we so bound by the Eighth Commandment? Luther said we are not:

This commandment is given first of all that everyone shall help his neighbor to secure his rights and not allow them to be hindered or twisted, no matter whether he be judge or witness and let it pertain to whatsoever it will...Where the sin is quite public...you can without any sin avoid him...because he has brought himself into disgrace, and you may also publicly testify concerning him. For where a matter is public in the light of day, there can be no slandering or false judgment or testifying... (I, 260, 284)

What is forbidden by the Eighth Commandment is false witness or testimony, which our current Catechism describes as “all talk, whether true or untrue, which comes from a heart with evil intentions.” The tan (Gausewitz) Catechism described false witness as “all talk that comes out of a false heart” (i.e., a heart that is not loyal or true to someone; a heart that is intent on sullyng or tearing down someone’s integrity, reputation, etc.).

Martin Luther himself gave a slightly different definition of false witness or testimony:

What is not manifest upon sufficient evidence no one shall make public. False witness...is everything which cannot be proved (I, 272, 271).

Elsewhere Luther took that definition a bit farther, and in doing so he also gave a very practical rule of thumb for people to follow in deciding whether to bear witness or make testimony against a neighbor:

Nobody is permitted to speak evil of a neighbor, except to those to whom this has been committed, as a judge and his assessor are obliged to examine and call witnesses in order to correct faults... If one takes it to the ones who are authorized to punish, one does well. Therefore, if your neighbor does evil, tell it to the burgomaster or the judge. If you are not willing to declare your neighbor's fault publicly to the government, then keep it to yourself. (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 51, p. 159f.)

Words like that give us a great deal of food for thought and preparing for our instruction classes. So also Luther's words on the same subject in the catechism:

No one is allowed publicly to judge and reprove his neighbor..., unless he have a command to judge and to reprove (publicly)... If I rush in, judging and passing sentence..., this is...meddling with the judgment and office of God... For no judge can punish to a higher degree nor go farther than to say, 'He is a thief, a murderer, a traitor, etc.' Therefore whoever presumes to say the same of his neighbor goes just as far as the emperor and all governments. For although you do not wield the sword, you employ your tongue to the shame and hurt of your neighbor. (I, 265, 268)

In other words, even though it is true, such witness is false in that it is seizing for ourselves a position which neither civil authority nor God have authorized us to occupy. It is false witness because we have no right to make such testimony. Which brings us to another matter worthy of our consideration: the matter of whose name, reputation, and/or honor are at stake when false witness or testimony are given.

We always teach that our neighbor's good name is in jeopardy—and not only his, but also that of his family. It should also be pointed out that when we sin against the Eighth Commandment we are hurting our own reputation and integrity. And finally, that means God's honor is being diminished, because God made our neighbor and us. He gave all of us our personalities, traits, abilities, etc. They are on loan to us from Him. So to lie about, slander, or defame a person because of those things is an offense against God.

It should be a matter of great concern to us that God's name or reputation not be damaged. It is a concern we want each of our youth confirmands to have, because they and we, as the children of God, carry God's name even as we carry the name of our parents. We do not want others to take offense at the name of God, but we want others to be drawn to love and believe in the name of our God.

Our youth confirmands will have that concern for God's name as a result of our showing them that God's name stands for many good things, the greatest of which is eternal salvation and life. Pointing out that false witness detracts from God's name will also give our catechumens one more reason to be more careful about and more eager to refrain from bearing false witness, and time spent instructing them in what constitutes false witness will enable them to exercise that care and to guide that zeal.

II.

Based on the foregoing pages, it can and must be said that parishioners who contact the circuit pastor or district president lodging complaints, charges, etc. against their pastor without having first approached him are invariably violating the Eighth Commandment. So is the circuit pastor or district president who accepts those charges as true and then acts on them accordingly. Parish pastors, however, ought to remember they, too, are guilty of breaking the Eighth Commandment over against their parishioners.

A number of examples could surely be cited, but in view of the scope of this essay, one in particular comes to mind. It is when pastors are gathered informally in one another's homes and at conferences or when they may otherwise have occasion to talk with one another. It may also occur when a pastor contacts the circuit pastor or district president about something.

We think of and refer to such situations and activity as 'letting our hair down' or airing some of our frustrations and disappointments. It is good that we unburden ourselves. God has no problem with that, because His Word repeatedly exhorts us to comfort and encourage one another, and in order to comfort or encourage someone, we have to know what is causing the discomfort and discouragement.

The problem is that more often than not what frustrates and discourages us are not things, but the people behind things—people who are not coming, doing, giving, etc. to the degree we think they could and should. Very often a pastor in talking with another pastor will say things like: "My people don't care. They just think about themselves. They have very little respect for the office of the ministry."

Since the Eighth Commandment requires that we interpret the words and actions of others in the kindest possible way, one can and must hope and trust that we mean no harm by such statements, but might they not be a case of our bearing false witness or making false testimony against our members just the same? False witness, because we maybe have not come anywhere near close to being that forthright in our preaching and other ministry to our members; and also false for two other reasons; 1) We cannot prove that testimony, because we cannot look into hearts and see if our members really do not care, etc.; and 2) we are really trying to make ourselves look good (or at least trying to salvage a bit of dignity for ourselves) at our members' expense.

The point here is not that two wrongs make a right (i.e., since pastors sometimes violate the Eighth Commandment over against their members, they should not be concerned if parishioners occasionally violate it in the case of their pastors). The point is rather how God's name might be honored and the kingdom better served if we pastors were as sensitive about our congregations' reputations in the eyes of others as we are about our own reputations, and if we were as alert for our own violations of the Eighth Commandment as we are to our members' violations of it.

Some congregations have "bad reputations", and one cannot help but wonder at times if maybe the reason is not such comments on the part of their pastors. Experience would seem to indicate that it is, because very often when new pastors arrive in those congregations the old reputations begin to diminish and disappear. Slowly but surely those congregations get a better reputation, and it is invariably due in part to the way in which their new pastors speak about them.

Mention was made earlier that pastors will sometimes consult with their circuit pastor or district president when they are uncertain about or at a loss as to how to proceed with an ongoing, troublesome situation in their congregation. Invariably parishioners' positions and

names are mentioned by the pastor—sometimes because he volunteers that information, and sometimes because the circuit pastor or district president will ask for it.

Is that a violation of the Eighth Commandment on the part of the pastor, circuit pastor, or district president? Apparently not, because the pastoral theology textbook currently in use at our seminary says: “The pastor may call on synodical brothers for help if differences between him and his congregation persist” (*The Shepherd under Christ*, p. 358).

Again it is hard (if not impossible) to imagine how any benefit could result from such a call, how the pastor could be consoled or otherwise counseled, without some exchange of information about and evaluations of the people involved. Likewise if a congregation representative or some other parishioner, who is sincerely concerned about the state and image of the kingdom in his or her community, approaches a circuit pastor or district president regarding a problem within the congregation or with the pastor.

If the approach consists only of charges and accusations against the pastor that have never been presented to him, it would certainly appear to be a violation of the Eighth Commandment. But it can hardly be counted as such if (as is often the case) a person’s contact with the circuit pastor or district president is for counsel as to what to do about a situation regarding his congregation and/or its pastor and the adverse effect it may have on the kingdom. Nor can it be counted as a sin against the Eighth Commandment on the part of the circuit pastor or district president if he asks the parishioner to describe the perceived problem or situation. Only then can he begin to determine what to counsel.

But does the parishioner not have his or her own pastor from whom to seek counsel? Should the parishioner not be seeking counsel from him? Perhaps so, and in many instances a circuit pastor or district president will tell the person that. Yet the Bible nowhere indicates we are to have only one earthly counselor, nor does it forbid us to decide whom we will go to for counsel. As the pastor has several options in seeking counsel (congregation neighboring pastor, circuit pastor, etc.), so congregations and their individual members may seek counsel from people other than their pastor.

It is clearly the position of our synod that this sort of thing will occur from time to time, and that it is not always out of order. Our synods *Handbook for Circuit Pastors* reminds circuit pastors. “...Remember that when speaking to or about a pastor, you will obey God’s Eighth Commandment.” (p. 13)

That supposes that circuit pastors will at times be talking about a pastor. It indicates it is possible to do that without violating the Eighth Commandment.

The pastor who was talked about should not think it is incumbent on the circuit pastor or district president to necessarily inform him of such a conversation—not even when the party involved was the pastor’s member. The discussion may have been successful in resolving the problem, in which case there is little reason to report it farther. The parishioner may have been shown how he jumped to conclusions or that he had otherwise acted rather foolishly in the matter. In which case it would be an *embarrassment* to the parishioner for the circuit pastor or district president to file a report with the local pastor.

In this matter the aforementioned circuit pastor’s handbook says: “In some cases the circuit pastor will want to discuss the complaint with the pastor”(p. 15).

That statement says there are times when he may not want to do that, and no biblical precepts are necessarily being transgressed if that should be the case. What constitutes such a time or case is not spelled out. It is left to the individual circuit pastor to carefully weigh and determine in the light of the Eighth Commandment

But what if the parishioner's contact-for-counsel with the circuit pastor or district president pretty much ends up being a report on how things are or are not in his congregation? Again, some may charge the Eighth Commandment is being violated there. In many instances, it no doubt is, and the person whose counsel was sought will have to so counsel the seeker. Yet there may be instances of that nature when the Eighth Commandment is not being violated.

The Apostle Paul comes to mind here. He remarks in I Corinthians 1:11 that he had received a report from Cloe's house about a situation in the congregation. Was the report solicited by Paul? Probably not, although we are not told. We do, however know that Paul was always very concerned about the congregations he had started, and in all likelihood when he wrote to or saw members of those congregations he would have inquired about their respective congregations.

Was Cloe's report authorized by the congregation or at least made with the knowledge of the congregations pastor? Again, we are not told, but it would seem that it was not. Had Cloe and her household expressed their concern to the congregation's pastor and leaders? Perhaps, but we cannot say with certainty. Was it a problem involving doctrine? Not directly, because the problem was intra-congregation quarreling.

Was Cloe's action a violation of the Eighth Commandment? Apparently not, because without any further ado the apostle addressed himself to the problem. So it was with him and other congregations.

In short, one gets the impression that Paul on several occasions addressed himself to problems of which he had heard without first verifying whether the report had first been filed with the local pastor. It also appears that if Paul had what he felt was reliable information, he did not hesitate to check it out.

We might say that was different, because Paul was an apostle and therefore had a special calling from God to establish and supervise congregations. No one will debate that point, but circuit pastors and district presidents also have a call, as such. We elect them to their respective offices, and their offices have clearly defined responsibilities: according to our synod's official legal documents:

“There shall be a Conference of Presidents composed of the Praesidium of the Synod and the presidents of the Synod's districts...The duties of the Conference of Presidents shall be to maintain and strengthen unity of doctrine and practice in the various districts of the Synod...”(Section Three of the Bylaws of the synod Constitution). “The (district) president shall supervise the work of the district circuit pastors”(Article VI of the Constitution for the Districts)... The district shall exercise supervision over its members in matters of doctrine and practice through circuit pastors... In intra-congregational matters the district shall have purely advisory authority and shall offer counsel and assistance in adjusting controversies...and in such other matters as may involve the interests of the Synod” (Article VIII of the Constitution for the Districts).

That does not authorize the circuit pastor and district president to take action on every report they receive. Yet they cannot ignore every report or expression of concern, either—particularly when it bears similarities to other information they may already have:

If a pastor or teacher in the circuit is charged with false doctrine or practice, the circuit pastor will have to determine whether the charge is valid. Before taking any kind of

public action (as distinct from a private visit), the circuit pastor should discuss the matter with the district president. Most complaints against a pastor are not a matter of doctrine... The circuit pastor should beware of getting involved in matters which are not his business. At the same time he cannot shirk his responsibilities.” (WELS *Handbook for Circuit Pastors*, p. 16)

Martin Luther, too, maintained that if there is reason to believe there is substance to a matter someone has expressed, the Eighth Commandment requires that investigation and other action be taken by those to whom responsibility in such matters has been delegated. He wrote in his *Large Catechism*:

It is summarily forbidden to speak any evil of our neighbor, however, the civil government, preachers, father and mother excepted in the understanding that this commandment does not allow evil to go unpunished...Here necessity requires one to speak of the evil, to prefer charges, to investigate and testify; and it is not different from the case of a physician who is sometimes compelled to examine and handle the patient whom he is to cure in secret parts. Just so governments, father and mother, brothers and sisters, and other friends are under obligation to each other to reprove evil whenever it is needful and profitable. (I, 274, 275)

Notice the words: “brothers, sisters and other good friends.” Those words certainly describe us, whether we are parish pastor, circuit pastor, or district president; because by faith in Jesus Christ we are all members of God’s family. One of the things the members of that family believe is that, despite our high calling, we have weaknesses and inadequacies. That, in turn, would indicate there will be times when a member or members of our congregations might want to speak to someone other than us--yes, that they on occasion may want to talk to someone about us.

If and when they do, let us not immediately assume they are trying to circumvent us or trying to undermine our ministry. Although what they are doing may look that way to us, the Eighth Commandment requires that we interpret their actions in the kindest possible way.

We can do that quite safely. Like us, the members of our congregations have weaknesses. Sometimes they are afraid to approach their pastor with concerns, because they do not want to sound critical or unappreciative of him and his work. Sometimes awe of the office of the pastoral ministry in the midst keeps lay people from approaching their pastor. Sometimes they feel helpless about a situation, simply because they have never before experienced anything like it. But more often than not, they are concerned- deeply concerned. They know their pastor, congregation, and the work of God’s kingdom in their midst will not be well served if things (as they perceive them) are allowed to continue. At the same time they do not want to do anything that would make the matter worse. So they sometimes go elsewhere for counsel.

This is not to say that motives excuse or justify means, but rather that our people’s motives in such instances can be quite honorable. They can stem from a desire to help us improve and otherwise undergird our ministries, which is not a violation of the Eighth Commandment, but the very sort of things that commandment requires.

Likewise if a circuit pastor or district president on the basis of a parishioner’s contact and expression of concerns, goes to the pastor involved and makes inquiry of him. That will be done at times, especially when it appears quite certain the parishioner is not going to take it up with

his pastor. It will also be done privately, making sure the parishioner does not get the impression someone is “going to bat” for him. In most cases the parishioner’s anonymity will also be guarded.

The matter may prove to be false, which is generally the case. The report received from the parishioner may prove to be untrue in substance. But reports of that kind are usually based on how people perceive things, and they are generally based on people’s perceptions over a long period of time. Therefore a pastor should not quickly brush aside such reports and expressions of concern. Rather, he should humbly and carefully consider them and, where possible, quietly go about doing what he can to change those perceptions.

Parishioners who perceive that attitude in their pastor will invariably prove to be people who defend, sneak well of, and otherwise support their pastor, thereby enabling him and them to devote their energies to bearing witness of the blessed truths of Jesus and His Word.

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