

# Circuit Pastors And The Eighth Commandment

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There is no doubt in my mind that our district presidents have the most difficult calling in our synod and are charged with the gravest responsibility. They have been given the oversight of doctrine and practice and are responsible for the welfare of the called workers and congregations in their individual districts.

Circuit pastors are called to assist their district president in carrying out his responsibilities. One of the most vexing problems a circuit pastor must wrestle with is how to handle accusations against called workers made by congregational members. How does the Eighth Commandment apply?

You have asked me to address this subject on the basis of Scripture and Luther's comments on the Eighth Commandment in the Large Catechism. Rather than trying to produce a casebook of Jesuit casuistry for every situation imaginable, I have tried to layout some general principles and offer a few brief applications. I believe that a general discussion of these principles in regard to particular challenges you are facing will be more beneficial than a lengthy treatise which tries to anticipate every individual situation you encounter.

1. *Circuit pastors are called to assist the district president in the oversight of doctrine and practice and to encourage and comfort called workers and congregations as they carry out the gospel ministry.*

We have chosen to organize our synod in such a way that district presidents have the oversight of doctrine and practice. Two vice-presidents and a secretary assist the district president in carrying out his responsibilities. Each conference in a district is divided into circuits. Each circuit elects a circuit pastor who serves as a liaison between the district president and the congregations and called workers in his circuit.

As in all forms of the public ministry, the gospel is to predominate as the circuit pastor carries out the work assigned to him. Christ instituted the public ministry to build up rather than to tear down. You are not called to be a spiritual detective or to lord it over the congregations and called workers in your care (1 Pt 5:3). You will not want to be seen as a threat or as one who meddles in another man's ministry or congregation. You cannot treat people with suspicion. A pastor does not go looking into people's lives and backgrounds to uncover sin. Rather you are to provide encouragement, comfort, and assistance. Pastors and teachers can become discouraged at the lack of results or spiritual fruit in their ministry. As a circuit pastor, you can apply the comfort God gives that his word "will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11). You can remind them of the privilege God has given them by making them his ambassadors and spokesmen to proclaim his message of salvation to people who are lost without it. You can remind them that God is using them to accomplish his purposes. No matter what the world or disgruntled members may say about them, in God's eyes (and the eyes of God's people) they are beautiful. That is the word our Lord uses to describe those who proclaim his message of salvation. As he caused Isaiah to write, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" (Isaiah 52:7) As you bring that message in your calling as a circuit pastor, you serve as an example for them and in turn receive God's praise as messengers of his good news.

Encouraging includes speaking well of called workers and their congregations. Encouraging means finding reasons to praise rather than finding fault. You are to be an example to those you serve by defending them, speaking well of them, and taking their words and actions in the kindest possible way.

- The circuit pastor may be asked to assist in solving problems in the congregations of his circuit. He is the first person outside the congregation's leadership to be contacted when problems arise with called workers.*

Because the church on earth is the church militant congregations and called workers can expect that problems will arise. The devil will not cease in his opposition to the work of the church. The world will sometimes openly and sometimes subtly undermine the Christian life and the gospel ministry. Every Christian will retain a sinful nature until the day he dies. That sinful nature causes problems in our own lives and leads us to say and do things that cause problems for those around us. It cannot be reformed or improved. It must be drowned by daily contrition and repentance.

Called workers fall into temptation. They are not immune to the sins of lust, greed, pride, abuse of authority, high-handedness, and laziness. Because they are in a position of authority among God's people, the sins of called workers can have a much more serious and widespread impact than the sins of other members of the Christian congregation. Sometimes a called worker causes problems for himself by a lack of tact or common sense. Sometimes he simply does not have the gifts that a particular call or congregational situation requires.

The elected leaders of a congregation are responsible for dealing with such problems. When they need advice on how to proceed or when they have reached an impasse in dealing with a particular problem, they may turn to the circuit pastor for assistance. You may have to listen to accusations or complaints in order to give God-pleasing advice.

An individual congregational member may be aware of a problem with a called worker and turn to the circuit pastor because he does not know how to proceed. You will instruct the congregational member to speak directly with the called worker according to Matthew 18. You will also remind him that the elected leaders of the congregation are next in the line of responsibility if his speaking directly with the called worker does not solve the problem.

- The circuit pastor cannot listen to innuendo, gossip, rumors, grumbling, or complaining about called workers. Discipline cannot be carried out if there is no evidence of wrongdoing or if the accused is not given a chance to be heard. Sin, impropriety, and poor judgment must be addressed when evidence of such conduct exists.*

A circuit pastor cannot be a party to gossip about his brothers in the ministry anymore than a pastor can be party to gossip about his members. A person's good name is a precious possession. For those who serve in the public ministry a good name is even more important. It is essential for their work. Ministers are to be "above reproach" (1 Tm 3:2) and "blameless" (Ti 1:7). To rob a minister of the gospel of his good name is to undermine or even destroy his ministry. Those who grumble and complain about their pastors or teachers should be reminded of the good qualities those people possess and should be encouraged to address such irritations or problems with the called worker privately. Accusations demand evidence in order that the matter can be dealt with properly. Those who come to share gossip or rumors without evidence must be admonished. They are bearing false witness contrary to the Eighth Commandment. As Luther declares in the Large Catechism,

False witness, then, is everything which cannot be properly proved. Therefore, what is not manifest upon sufficient evidence no one shall make public or declare for truth; and, in short, whatever is secret should be allowed to remain secret, or at any rate, should be secretly reprov'd, as we shall hear. Therefore if you encounter an idle tongue which betrays and slanders some one, contradict such a one promptly to his face, that he may blush; thus many a one will hold his tongue who else would bring some poor man into bad repute, from which he would not easily extricate himself. For honor and a good name are easily taken away, but not easily restored.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Large Catechism, par. 271-273

It is unfair, unwise, and unscriptural to proceed when there is no evidence of wrongdoing, but only idle rumor or speculation. St. Paul warns, "Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses" (1 Tm 5:19). If anyone is to admonish a brother, "he must be an eye- or earwitness, or have his information by way of confession, or on the basis of unimpeachable evidence."<sup>2</sup> Even with such evidence one should not assume guilt, but give the accused an opportunity to be heard. There are at least two sides to every story. Things are not always what they seem to be. Good and honest people can be mistaken about what they have seen and heard. Christian charity does not allow us to jump to conclusions or make rash judgments.

When sin or some impropriety is suspected, but there is no evidence, you can commit the matter to God in prayer. He sees all and knows all. Everyone will one day stand before his judgment seat. In his own good time God may make the sin manifest so that the sinner can be called to repentance. You can be alert to problems without treating a person with suspicion. You may want to consult with a trusted brother about the situation without naming names or allowing him to guess whom you have in mind. You may be able to address certain problems indirectly in a conference sermon, paper, or discussion, but you cannot address a particular sin in someone's life directly or accuse him without evidence.

If a person comes to you with evidence of wrongdoing on the part of a called worker, you are to remind him of his responsibility to deal with the matter personally and privately. As Luther explains,

But the true way in this matter would be to observe the order according to the Gospel, Matt. 18, 15, where Christ says: *If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone.* Here you have a precious and excellent teaching for governing well the tongue, which is to be carefully observed against this detestable misuse. Let this, then, be your rule, that you do not too readily spread evil concerning your neighbor and slander him to others, but admonish him privately that he may amend [his life]. Likewise, also, if someone report to you what this or that one has done, teach him, too, to go and admonish him personally, if he have seen it himself; but if not, that he hold his tongue.<sup>3</sup>

When sin is known on the basis of evidence it cannot be ignored. Speaking to a sinner about his sin and urging repentance is a moral obligation for every Christian. Christian love demands it. Our Savior tells us, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him" (Lk 17:3). Paul encourages us, "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" (Ga 6:1). The goal of our admonition is to gain our brother. As Jesus explains, "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" (Mt 18:15).

Those who are called to be in authority cannot ignore sin, impropriety, or poor judgment (if that poor judgment is causing problems for God's people). Christian love demands that such problems be addressed for the sake of the Christian congregation and our brother in the ministry. God's judgment came down on Eli the priest for his failure to restrain his sons from their wickedness in the conduct of their priestly office (1 Sa 3:13, see the whole account 1 Sa 2:12-4:22). Luther explains that those in authority are not breaking the Eighth Commandment when they carry out discipline even though their actions harm the name of the one being disciplined.

Thus you see that it is summarily forbidden to speak any evil of our neighbor, however, the civil government, preachers, father and mother excepted, on the understanding that this commandment does not allow evil to go unpunished. Now, as according to the Fifth Commandment no one is to be injured in body, and yet Master Hannes [the executioner] is excepted, who by virtue of his office does his neighbor no good, but only evil and harm, and nevertheless does not sin against God's commandment, because God has on His own account instituted that office; for He has reserved punishment for His own good pleasure, as He threatens in the First Commandment,—just so also, although no one has a right in his own person to judge and condemn anybody, yet if they to whose office it belongs fail to do it, they sin as well as he who

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<sup>2</sup> Armin W. Schuetze & Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd under Christ*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1974) p. 166.

<sup>3</sup> Large Catechism, par. 276

would do so of his own accord, without such office. For 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 good friends, are under obligation to each other to reprove evil wherever it is needful and profitable.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps an example from history can serve to illustrate both the difficulty and the importance of carrying out the Christian discipline of called workers who have fallen. C. F. W. Walther (1811-1887) and the Saxon immigrants in Missouri found themselves in a very difficult situation when accusations of impropriety and adultery were brought against Pastor Martin Stephan (1777-1846), the acknowledged leader and chosen bishop of the group. August Suelflow writes,

An unusual event occurred following the service in St. Louis conducted by Pastor Loeber on May 5, 1839. The sermon Loeber delivered no longer exists, but apparently it was a most soul-searching sermon. In response, two women, each independently without the knowledge of the other, made detailed confessions to Loeber of improper relations with Stephan. These were outright admissions of adultery; in the days which followed, other women came forward, claiming that Stephan had attempted to seduce them.<sup>5</sup>

The charges had the ring of truth to them. These women were making confession of their own sin and their consciences were burdened knowing that this sin involved the spiritual leader of their community. Pastor Loeber could not ignore the situation. He conferred with the other pastors. They apprised Stephan of the accusations. Eventually they brought charges not only of sexual immorality but also of false doctrine and major mismanagement in administration. The congregation removed Stephan from the ministry and deported him from the colony in spite of the fact that he continued to proclaim his innocence.<sup>6</sup>

The immigrants were thrown into turmoil for some time because of Stephan's actions. Since he had organized the emigration from Saxony and they had pledged loyalty to him, they began to wonder whether their move to America was God-pleasing. Their pastors had resigned legitimate calls in Germany. Was the church still present in their midst? Did they have legitimate calls? Under the leadership of C. F. W. Walther they came to a clear scriptural understanding and resolution of these matters. The sin of Stephan had caused serious problems for them. Nevertheless, carrying out Christian discipline on Stephan and being forced into Scripture to find the answers to their spiritual questions resulted in great long-term blessings for the Saxons of Missouri (and for American Lutheranism as well).

God's blessing rests on those who carry out Christian discipline according to his will and command. The congregation or church body that ignores its duty and fails to carry out Christian discipline is in danger of losing the gospel. The gospel becomes meaningless when those in authority act as if it makes no difference what a person believes or does.

4. *The circuit pastor must be concerned with the welfare of the congregation, the sanctity of the public ministry, and the good of his brother or sister in the ministry.*

The public ministry of the gospel is a glorious service in which God entrusts individual sinners with the duty of proclaiming God's law and gospel to the members of the Christian congregation and reaching out to unbelievers with the message of salvation. The public ministry exists for the sake of God's people and is intended to be a blessing for them (Eph 4:11-13). The welfare of God's people, therefore, is always to be primary in the thoughts and actions of those who serve in the public ministry, including those who serve as

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<sup>4</sup> Large Catechism, par. 274-275

<sup>5</sup> August R. Suelflow, *Servant of the Word: The Life and Ministry of C. F. W. Walther*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000) p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50-55.

circuit pastors. Your work is guided by the question, What will be best for God's people and serve the best interests of God's kingdom?

St. Paul showed the same concern for God's people in the way he conducted his ministry. He writes, "We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited" (2 Co 6:3). We cannot allow anything to continue that tarnishes the public ministry or places stumbling blocks in the way of God's people or in the way of outsiders whom we are trying to win with the gospel.

At the same time we cannot treat called workers cavalierly or be unconcerned about their spiritual, physical, or emotional welfare. In carrying out your responsibilities you will always want to have the good of the called worker in mind even when it means removing him from office.

5. *Public matters generally are to be dealt with publicly, but it may also be possible to deal with them privately. Private matters are generally to be dealt with privately, but they may also become public.*

Generally speaking, public matters not only can be, but also should be dealt with publicly. The Apostle Paul declares, "Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning" (1 Tm 5:20). He practiced what he preached. When word came to him that a member of the congregation in Corinth was living in sin, Paul not only listened to the report but also acted quickly and decisively in response to it. His help was needed. People were troubled by what had happened. Not only was a member of the Corinthian congregation living in sin, the congregation was ignoring the situation and apparently even condoning it. Paul wrote quite sharply to the Corinthians, "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord" (1 Co 5:1-5). The sin was public. The congregation's failure to act was public knowledge. Paul rebuked the congregation in a letter that apparently was to be read publicly and commanded them to take public action.

When Peter's conduct in Antioch betrayed the freedom that the gospel brings, Paul did not hesitate to rebuke him publicly. As Paul relates, "When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, 'You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?'" (Ga 2:14)

Luther explains that answering public false teaching publicly is not a sin against the Eighth Commandment.

All this has been said regarding secret sins. But where the sin is quite public so that the judge and everybody know it, you can without any sin avoid him and let him go, because he has brought himself into disgrace, and you may also publicly testify concerning him. For when a matter is public in the light of day, there can be no slandering or false judging or testifying; as, when we now reprove the Pope with his doctrine, which is publicly set forth in books and proclaimed in all the world. For where the sin is public, the reproof also must be public, that everyone may learn to guard against it.<sup>7</sup>

A public sin, however, may at times be dealt with privately depending on how *public* the sin is. You may have to determine how many people actually know. If the matter can be resolved without letting more people know, there may be no need to make it any more public than it already is. Your goal is to win your brother. Our pastoral theology text explains,

In the case of public sins which have been committed in the presence of the congregation or are a matter of public knowledge and an offense to the congregation, admonition may still take place privately and in the presence of witnesses if that seems to be the best way of gaining the offending brother. But that in

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<sup>7</sup> Large Catechism, par. 284

such cases these steps need not precede is evident from Galatians 2:11ff and 1 Timothy 5:20. In these cases love for the sinner is decisive. We shall ask ourselves which course in our judgment offers the best prospect of winning the guilty brother.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, if a few people know about a sin or problem, it is likely that many do or soon will. It may be difficult to keep the problem and its resolution quiet. Circuit pastors and district officials will want to avoid the appearance of a cover up or sweeping something under the carpet. Such perceptions might undermine the confidence of your constituency in you and hinder your ability to carry out the demands of your office in the future.

Matters that are truly private should remain private. You will want to respect confidentiality. Private matters, however, properly become public matters when a person refuses to heed Christian admonition. Those who are called to make such matters public are not violating the Eighth Commandment, but are carrying out their Christian responsibility. As our Savior urges us, "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.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Mt 18:15-18).

### *Conclusion*

You have been called to carry out an important responsibility for your district and its congregations. Because the office to which you have been called entails oversight, you may have to listen to complaints and accusations against your brothers and sisters in the ministry. Having heard a complaint or accusation for which no evidence is offered, you will instruct and admonish those who have come to you not to spread rumors or go behind the back of their pastor or teacher. By listening to the complaint or accusation you are not being a party to gossip or violating the Eighth Commandment so long as you give the necessary instruction and admonition. If evidence is presented to substantiate the accusation, you may have to inform the person to speak with the called worker about his sin privately or encourage him to speak with the elected leaders of the congregation. You are not violating the Eighth Commandment, but fulfilling your calling by teaching and encouraging people to carry out their Christian responsibility.

In carrying out your office you will strive to work for the spiritual welfare of the congregation, the good of the ministry and of your brother who serves in the ministry. If it becomes necessary for you to bring sin or wrongdoing to light through public admonition or discipline, you are performing a God-pleasing good work and are not violating the Eighth Commandment. When there is no evidence of wrongdoing you cannot act on your suspicions or make your suspicions public. You commit such matters to God who will act in his own good time.

You will strive to have the gospel predominate in everything you do. You will encourage the called workers and congregations in your care with God's promises. When it becomes necessary for you to be involved in discipline, you will carry out your responsibilities for the sake of the gospel and for the good of everyone involved.

May God bless your important work and ministry.

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<sup>8</sup> Schuetze and Habeck, *op. cit.*, p. 170.