

“PASTOR, HAVE YOU HEARD...” THE ROLE OF RUMOR IN BROTHERLY
ADMONITION

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ABSTRACT

Pastoral ministry in this age presents unique challenges for brotherly admonition. Gossip, whether spread in person or on social media, often serve as a conduit for misinformation, yet they may also provide clues about members who are straying from the faith. This thesis explores whether rumors gleaned from gossip can be responsibly used by pastors in carrying out admonition. After surveying existing literature on gossip, slander, and pastoral care, these resources are evaluated through the lens of Scripture. A detailed exegesis of Matthew 18 provides a biblical framework for admonition, while a word study of Hebrew and Greek terms commonly translated as “gossip” clarifies their ethical implications. Biblical principles and examples are examined to assess whether information obtained through gossip or social media can or should be trusted. Finally, a practical model is proposed for pastoral response, distinguishing cases where rumors should be ignored from those where they may warrant further investigation. This study argues that while gossip is generally harmful and should not be relied upon, certain situations may justify its cautious use as a starting point for pastoral engagement, always guided by Scripture and love for the erring brother or sister.

INTRODUCTION

Ten minutes before the Sunday service begins, you, the pastor, are greeting your members when you overhear a conversation between two of them. “Did you hear that Brian is cheating on his wife? Barbara said that she saw him with another woman Thursday night.” She probably didn’t mean to say it within earshot of the pastor, but does it matter? Brian and his wife come to worship about once every month, and you care about him and his family. Could it be true? Who do you talk with first? How should you proceed?

You are scrolling through Facebook one evening, settling down for bed, and you see a post from one of your members. She has shared a post from Planned Parenthood, advocating for women’s abortion rights. She hasn’t been in church for a while, but you walked her through the Catechism and confirmed her yourself. She probably didn’t intend for you to see it, but now you have. Should you talk to her, or just let it be? How should you proceed?

Though all cases are different, every pastor will face situations like these. In our modern world, it can be hard to ascertain the truth. Gossip can be used to communicate truths, but often it may bend the truth to hurt someone else. After all, “You can ruin a person’s life with zero truth.”¹ And, especially with the dawn of artificial intelligence, the internet, especially social media, can be a hotbed for misinformation and rumors. Though communication with others is a blessing from God, any blessing can be misused and turned into a tool of the devil. However, can

1. Kate Shellnutt, “WHISPERS or WHISTLEBLOWING?” *Christianity Today* 65 (June, 2021): 43.

these tools of the devil be used by the tactful pastor to bring sheep back to the fold? Can gossip or social media serve as a potential source of information about straying members? Or should we avoid it like the plague? This is the question I have done my best to answer, with the help of other scholars and pastors. When engaging in brotherly admonition, the pastor should almost never rely on gossip for a reliable source of information, whether it comes from word of mouth or social media. In fact, the gossipier should be admonished. However, there may be situations when the pastor ought to follow up on widespread gossip he has heard.

The following shows how I intend to research my thesis. First, we will review select literature that has already been written on the topics of brotherly admonition, gossip and slander, and social media. These resources will be evaluated through the lens of Scripture to determine whether they are useful in relation to brotherly admonition. Next, we will see what the Bible says, with a text study of Matthew 18 as a guide for brotherly admonition, as well as a word study for Greek and Hebrew terms that are commonly translated as “gossip.” We will also view Biblical principles and examples pertaining to brotherly admonition and gossip. Finally, a model will be presented on how the pastor could theoretically carry out brotherly admonition, depending on whether he can trust his source of information or not.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Some cases within a congregational context that require brotherly admonition will be black and white. If a pastor knows his people, he will know when someone is acting differently, or he will clearly and plainly see when a member of his flock is not acting in the way Christ would have him act. However, many cases will fall into a grey area. In such cases, the truth may not always be easily ascertained. When the pastor comes across a rumor of sin, it is more difficult to

determine whether he should act or not. In these moments, the pastor needs to remember that he cannot act on a hunch. This will only cause a rupture between the pastor and his member, creating an environment of doubt rather than trust. A member should be able to trust his pastor with anything, but if that trust is breached by a false allegation, it may close the door to any future support that the pastor could provide. Koelpin states, “Brotherly admonition that truly seeks sinners must first determine if there is really sin involved.”² He also encourages, “DO NOT act on hearsay. Find out what is meant by hearsay and avoid it... DO NOT proceed with brotherly discipline on a hunch, but make sure you have evidence that a sin has actually occurred.”³

Ascertaining the truth when it comes to a sin is a delicate matter. And in this age, when a lie can be easily spread by word of mouth or online, the pastor must take great care before he goes ahead with brotherly admonition. He does not want to wrongfully ruin the reputation of someone who is a member of his congregation, nor does he want to sever his relationship with them unintentionally. In this paper, I identify two sources of information that pastors ought to handle cautiously: gossip and social media. However, with a blend of common sense and pastoral tact, he may be able to use these to his advantage.

Gossip: Useful or Dangerous?

Now, one could immediately object that gossip itself is a sin that merits admonishment by another Christian. And that is a valid reaction. However, it may be possible for gossip to serve a

2. John M. Koelpin, “Brotherly Admonition in the Congregation: God’s Seeking Grace,” (2012), 12.

3. Koelpin, “Brotherly Admonition,” 19.

good purpose in brotherly admonition. Rightly defined, gossip is, “the intimate interchange of prejudicial information within social groups, by way of innuendo, whispering campaign, allusion, insinuation, hint, with or without deliberate malicious intent, about people and the way they act.”⁴ This is our preferred definition. Others may not see gossip in the same way. For most people in the world, “talking about others behind their back is a time-worn tradition. It can be a fun way to pass the time or a cathartic way to blow off steam”⁵

Mark Alfano and Brian Robinson offer a simple definition: “gossip occurs within a triadic relationship of speaker, hearer, and subject. Intuitively, one cannot gossip about oneself or the person(s) to whom one is speaking. In the paradigmatic case, you gossip to one person about some absent third party.”⁶ In their journal article, Alfano and Robinson attempt to defend the value of evaluative gossip. “Most evaluative gossip offers a negative evaluation of the absent subject, such as ‘Pam is a liar.’ Pam has allegedly violated the moral norm of truth-telling, and the speaker condemns her for it.”⁷ More on evaluative gossip later.

According to Arbuckle’s definition, Gossip is an intimate interchange. This can mean that the one who spreads the gossip A) received that information in an intimate fashion and in confidence from the subject of the gossip, and then betrays that confidence by letting someone else in on the secret; B) discovered an intimate detail about the subject’s life as an eyewitness or by word of mouth, which they had no right to tell another soul about, yet shared it with friends

4. Gerald A. Arbuckle, “From Gossip to Conspiracy Thinking,” *Australasian Catholic Record* 99/2 (2022): 188.

5. Mark Alfano, and Brian Robinson, “Gossip as a Burdened Virtue,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice : An International Forum* 20, no. 3 (2017): 473.

6. Alfano and Robinson, “Gossip as Virtue,” 474.

7. Alfano and Robinson, “Gossip as Virtue,” 475.

anyway; or C) made up a story about the subject and told it to another person, with the intent to ruin his reputation. It is “prejudicial,” meaning that the gossip may have something against the subject of the gossip, or that they jumped to conclusions without learning the whole truth. The ways that gossip is spread should give caution, as, if gossip were truly harmless, why spread this information subtly rather than shouting it through a megaphone? Whether the intent is malicious or not, the result is always the same: sin occurs.

The way most Christians see it, gossip is sin. It is an inexcusable offense against the eighth commandment: “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor” (Exo 20:16).

In Martin Luther’s explanation of this commandment in his Large Catechism, he writes,

There is a very great difference between judging sin and having knowledge of sin. You may certainly know about a sin, but you should not judge it. I may certainly see and hear that my neighbor sins, but I have no command to tell others about it... When you become aware of a sin, however, do nothing but turn your ears into a tomb and bury it...⁸

Therefore, gossip, even though it may be seen as harmless talk, ought to be avoided and admonished when you see it happen. However, Luther adds, “bury it...until you are appointed a judge and are authorized to administer punishment by virtue of your office.”⁹ Now, this was written to apply more to legal situations. However, a believer does have a duty to admonish their brother’s sin when they become aware of it. Luther adds,

If you encounter someone with a worthless tongue who gossips and slanders someone else, rebuke such people straight to their faces and make them blush with shame. Then those who otherwise would bring some poor person into disgrace, from which one could scarcely clear one’s self, will hold their tongue. For honor and good name are easily taken away but not easily restored.¹⁰

8. Martin Luther, “Large Catechism,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 421.

9. Luther, “Large Catechism,” 421.

10. Luther, “Large Catechism,” 422.

These measures may seem extreme. But which is preferable: making your brother or sister feel embarrassed and ashamed over their sin for a moment, or letting them remain under threat of condemnation forever? Luther says if you hear a Christian brother or sister gossiping, it is proper to admonish the offender, especially if the gossip is of a malicious nature.

However, are there any exceptions to allowing gossip? Scholars are split on any possible morality of gossip. Thomas Aquinas wrote that gossip can be permissible, so long as it meets certain conditions. Matthew Lee Anderson, after studying Aquinas' writings, concludes that gossip has an unfair reputation among Christians and that it can be used correctly as long as it is protective. He writes, "Restoring gossip's reputation within Christian communities begins by seeing how it can be animated by our duty to protect others."¹¹

In writing this, he is not saying that all gossip is okay. Otherwise, the prophets and the apostle Paul would not have warned against it. Gossip can be a dangerous thing, and Anderson reflects this view as he writes,

When our gossip has no immediate purpose, we risk merely delighting in the discovery of an individual's wrongdoing and the corresponding diminishment of their reputation. The idleness or aimlessness that often characterizes gossip seems to be animated in part by these pleasures, which further the practices' tendency toward exaggeration: the tongue, as the Epistle of James so aptly puts it, is a spark that sets a forest on fire (James 3:5, RSV).¹²

So, gossip, in general, is not permitted. But there is a time and a place for sin to be confronted. In most situations, this will be done privately, either by someone in spiritual authority or by a layperson only "when the opportunity occurs."¹³ However, there may be a time for sin to be

11. Anderson, Matthew Lee, "(When) Is There a Christian Responsibility to Gossip?" *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 137.

12. Anderson, "Christian Responsibility to Gossip," 140.

13. Anderson, "Christian Responsibility to Gossip," 141.

announced rather than confronted in private. “Thomas¹⁴ argues that wrongdoers engaged in secret sins should be publicly denounced when *third parties* are in danger of being harmed.”¹⁵

I can see the reasoning behind this. But great precautions must be used, as we want to avoid defamation if a sin has not actually happened. There must be certainty that this sin is taking place. According to Anderson, Aquinas is well aware of this. He writes,

On his view, judgment denotes a “right decision about what is just,” which belongs to reason and which manifests the virtue of justice. Such a judgment goes awry when the “reason lacks certainty.” Forming judgments on the basis of loose conjectures would manifest either rashness or suspicion. Thomas is clear that such suspicion is wrong for both agent-centric and other-centric reasons. On the one side, suspicion arises because a person’s own sin makes them think ill of others because they are ill-disposed toward the other, or because they are cynical after a lifetime of experience. In any of those cases, the more intense the suspicion, the more vicious it is. On the other side, if we suspect someone “without sufficient cause,” we injure them... It is better, he writes, to “err frequently through thinking well of a wicked man, than to err less frequently through having an evil opinion of a good man.”¹⁶

We all have a sinful nature, so we know that all are sinners. But a specific sin ought not to be revealed unless you can be certain that the sin is happening. Otherwise, Anderson says, “we ought to think well of others only ‘unless there is evident proof to the contrary.’”¹⁷

The nature of gossip is defamatory. It ruins a person’s reputation, something that is very easy to lose and very hard to win back. For this reason, we tend to avoid it. What if, however, the sinner has ruined his own reputation against one brother or sister, or against a small group? Consider cases of physical or sexual abuse. If the offender sins against his brother or sister in

14. Whenever Matthew Anderson uses the name “Thomas” in his article, he is referring to Thomas Aquinas. When you see Thomas in the following paragraphs, equate that with Thomas Aquinas.

15. Anderson, “Christian Responsibility to Gossip,” 142.

16. Anderson, “Christian Responsibility to Gossip,” 143.

17. Anderson, “Christian Responsibility to Gossip,” 144.

such a way, and is told that this action was wrong, yet they continue to do it, indeed, that offender's reputation is ruined in the eyes of this brother or sister. But everyone else may still think highly of the offender because they do not have knowledge of his or her sin. In this case, Aquinas would permit gossip. Anderson writes,

He permits defamatory speech about third parties behind their back, if the intention behind such defamation is toward some sufficiently valuable end and the circumstances are such that the act is warranted. Thomas lays down two conditions for just defamation: one must say "what is true, . . . as when a man reveals another's sin, while observing the right order of so doing." As Thomas is unsparing about our obligation to speak only the truth, permissibly defaming a person behind their back must satisfy the "right order" condition.¹⁸

This "valuable end" would be the protection of others. If it is possible that this offender could repeat this sin against another brother or sister, there must be some way to prevent it. Aquinas would say that gossip is a legitimate method of doing so.

Is it okay to defame someone, even if you are certain that there is sin? Aquinas would say yes, only if the defamation is just. While he permits this form of gossip, what he does not permit is backbiting. Anderson writes, "For Thomas, backbiting happens when we defame another in their absence through sharing falsehoods about them, exaggerating their sins, or by 'revealing something unknown about them.'"¹⁹ Aquinas believed that backbiting is a serious sin, as "the backbiter is a 'murderer occasionally,' since they give someone else an 'occasion for hating or despising his neighbor.'"²⁰ However, if both involve revealing something unknown and

18. Anderson, "Christian Responsibility to Gossip," 145.

19. Anderson, "Christian Responsibility to Gossip," 145.

20. Anderson, "Christian Responsibility to Gossip," 145.

defamation, what is the difference between gossip and backbiting? Aquinas says the difference lies in the intent.

For Thomas, words are signs, rather than mere sounds, which means their significance “depends on the speaker’s inward intention.” The intention with which a person engages in backbiting, or gossip, makes a difference for our evaluation of the act. Because backbiting always involves defamation, it is an especially grave matter for Thomas. This is especially the case if we undertake it intentionally, rather than accidentally: we sin “more grievously” if we speak “deliberately than if [we sin] through weakness or carelessness.” Yet intentions can also exonerate: when one defames a third party behind their back “for the sake of some necessary good, and with attention to the due circumstances, it is not a sin and cannot be called backbiting.” Importantly, though, such defamatory speech is not value-neutral for Thomas: even just gossip is still material and accidental participation in backbiting, even if it is not so “strictly and formally speaking,”²¹

He goes so far as to say that just gossip is not a sin under these circumstances. In his conclusion, Anderson writes,

...However high the stakes surrounding just defamation are, institutions should preserve it as a possible means of social control by appropriately qualifying their denunciations of gossip. Overly broad prohibitions risk dissuading conscientious people from sharing information that would be relevant to other people’s safety, leaving individuals vulnerable to further harm by bad actors.²²

Alfano and Robinson take a similar view to Aquinas, going as far as saying that gossip can even be virtuous. Their focus is on gossip by those who are being oppressed, being used as a tool to subtly fight back against that oppression. They write,

...In the context of oppression, certain traits become virtues for people in systematically disempowered situations, which can be used in the pursuit of flourishing in the context of oppression and as means of helping others who are similarly disadvantaged... by gossiping we warn others about wrongdoers (including oppressors) and call for a collectively safer means of punishing wrongdoers than direct confrontation.²³

21. Anderson, “Christian Responsibility to Gossip,” 145-146.

22. Anderson, “Christian Responsibility to Gossip,” 150.

23. Alfano and Robinson, “Gossip as Virtue,” 474.

This lines up with the intent of gossip as presented by Arbuckle, who writes, “The gossip, motivated by envy or rage over other people’s successes or failures, achieves at the moment of gossiping a sense of power over the person gossiped about. The person receiving the information not only shares this power but also feels flattered that he or she is trusted to hear the news.”²⁴

In the context of oppression, gossip gives the oppressed a sense that they have some degree of power over their oppressor. And, potentially, they do. James warns Christians about the power and the danger of the tongue:

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell (Jas 3:3–6).

Words have power. They can build up and break down. They can bring one success and bring another to ruin. The pastor needs to educate his people on this power, so that they do not misuse it.

There is some merit to Alfano and Robinson’s line of thought. In some cases, it will be dangerous for the brother or sister who has been sinned against to confront their brother, especially if that sin is abusive in nature toward that brother or sister. It can be easy for the Christian to feel trapped in this situation, especially if the sinner is family, boyfriend/girlfriend, or another close friend, or even a higher-up at work. Alfano and Robinson contend that this use of gossip is justified. They say, “Evaluative gossip is a response to norm violation. We often feel compelled to report a norm violator to other people... People have a menu of options for handling different sorts of norm violations and violators, ranging from rewarding good behavior

24. Arbuckle, “Gossip to Conspiracy Thinking,” 189.

to punishing bad behavior, but also including both abandonment and ostracism.”²⁵ They claim that because the sinner has violated a norm, the punishment brought by gossip, in whatever form it may take, is deserved for the one who broke the norm. This gossip also serves as a warning for others not to associate with the subject.

Alfano and Robinson discourage gossip when it is not known to be true or if it is known to be false, but not for the reason you might think. They write,

Speakers who repeat gossip that they do not know to be true or which they even know to be false propagate misinformation. In addition, speakers who fail to contradict gossip they know or suspect is false may undermine the conventions that make gossip functional... One function of gossip is protect the hearer of gossip from untrustworthy partners, but this function can only be fulfilled to the extent that the hearer trusts the speaker.²⁶

Their problem is not with the nature of telling a lie itself, but the fact that the one gossiping may lose credibility if their gossip is proved false. If this happens, the protective system may fall apart. As pastors, we would simply see this as a consequence of the sin. When gossiping, a person can only be trusted so long as their information is either proven to be correct or not proven to be false. Otherwise, the reputation of the gossip suffers, and they are no longer considered to be trustworthy. People will turn from them to other sources of gossip.

Gerald Arbuckle condemns gossip in all forms and contexts. He maintains that there is no such thing as harmless gossip. He writes, “It is a disguised form of violence inasmuch as it is commonly prefaced with a comment like ‘You know, I do not wish him/her any harm, but ...’ (after which gossips proceed to do precisely what they say they will not do).”²⁷ In his eyes, the

25. Alfano and Robinson, “Gossip as Virtue,” 476.

26. Alfano, Robinson, “Gossip as Virtue,” 476.

27. Gerald Arbuckle, “Gossip to Conspiracy Thinking,” 188.

harm that gossip can do to someone's reputation outweighs the protection it can provide for other people, as "People can be demonized locally and globally, often anonymously, with lightning speed. Redress is rarely possible."²⁸ He points out that the scriptures critique gossip. He claimed that the serpent gossiped with Eve about God, thereby painting gossip as the tool of the devil, which caused mankind to transgress. He also points out times when Jesus is the target of gossip, though he is able to rebuke it because he knows the thoughts of his enemies and what they say behind his back. As examples, he uses Matthew 11:18–19, when the Pharisees gossip that Jesus can do miracles because he has a demon, and John 6:43, when the people doubt his words and whisper among themselves, because they know he is the son of Joseph.²⁹

He warns about the other sins that gossiping can lead to: scapegoating and conspiracy thinking. Concerning scapegoating, he writes, "scapegoating formally transforms malevolent judgements of others from a world of shared secrets directly into the public arena."³⁰ He gives multiple examples of gossip turning into scapegoating, which caused even more sin. One example was the Salem Witch Trials. He writes, "Historians acknowledge that gossip was a fundamental factor in the fostering of social and political turmoil that resulted in the magic-inspired witchcraft accusations and trials in seventeenth-century colonial New England."³¹ Another example was of Hitler, who set up the Jews as a scapegoat. This ultimately became a widely believed conspiracy theory, leading to the abominations of the holocaust during World War II. "Hitler claimed that Jews were poisoning the German Aryan blood and Aryan soul, thus

28. Arbuckle, "Gossip to Conspiracy Thinking," 188.

29. Arbuckle, "Gossip to Conspiracy Thinking," 193.

30. Arbuckle, "Gossip to Conspiracy Thinking," 192.

31. Arbuckle, "Gossip to Conspiracy Thinking," 194.

holding back Germany from becoming a dominant nation; they had to be eliminated. Many Germans unquestionably accepted this conspiracy theory.”³² He claims, “Conspiracy theories are ubiquitous and can cause immense harm to people, influencing political policy decisions, social behaviours, including medical choices.”³³ While these are real issues, I don’t see scapegoating as too much of a problem within congregations. Even if there is, when one group is putting the blame on another, it usually isn’t because of gossip. And there will always be conspiracy theories present among members in churches, but it is possible to educate your members to know what they look like, but maybe done in a way so that those who believe them are not offended.

In his conclusion, Arbuckle writes,

These behaviours are often closely linked with feelings of fear, uncertainty, or being out of control; commonly personal and/or cultural crises encourage such reactions. Scapegoating falsely focuses on an external cause of problems, thus negating or lessening the guilt of the agent; it also makes people feel bonded as they unite with others to scapegoat the victims. Yet the commandment “Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor” (Deut 5:20) applies to all forms of scapegoating... Gossip and scapegoating ultimately killed Jesus.³⁴

Unfortunately, gossip indeed draws people together in sin. But there is never a good reason to do so. I agree with the author that gossip should be avoided at all costs, and this value can be instilled into your members by good preaching and, when gossip occurs, personal rebuke and absolution. Professor Emeritus John Schuetze from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary also

32. Arbuckle, “Gossip to Conspiracy Thinking,” 196.

33. Arbuckle, “Gossip to Conspiracy Thinking,” 197.

34. Arbuckle, “Gossip to Conspiracy Thinking,” 200.

discourages gossip and acting upon gossip, even in the setting of brotherly admonition. He writes,

Whether this sin is committed directly against us is not the point. What matters is that we have direct knowledge of the sin. We are not acting on rumors, referrals, gossip, or secondhand reports. We are not in a position to admonish every brother or sister who sins. That admonition may be the responsibility of someone else. This is true even for us as pastors.³⁵

It is true that if we, as pastors, acted on every rumor and report we heard, we would end up on a wild goose chase, attempting to admonish over and over, and as a result, members would be agitated or even lose trust in their pastor.

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Professor Armin Schuetze shared a similar view, but permitted an exception to this. He wrote,

Charity demands that newspaper accounts or reports widely circulated among the general public are not to be accepted offhand as a valid basis for admonition. But concern for the brother will move one discreetly and tactfully to confront him with what has been printed or is being said about him and to ask to hear his side of the story. Only if it becomes evident that he is indeed guilty of sin will admonition be in order.³⁶

Today, even if reports like these were in the newspaper, people most likely would not see them. Rather, this has an application for social media. The good news is that it has gotten much easier to confront the subject discreetly and tactfully, thanks to private messaging, whether via texting, Email, or private messaging on the website itself. As the pastor has the opportunity, it would be better to do this than to ignore a potentially sinful post completely.

35. John Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls: The Art of Pastoral Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017), 194–195.

36. Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd under Christ: A Textbook for Pastoral Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1974), 168–169.

BROTHERLY ADMONITION IN MATTHEW 18

When studying brotherly admonition, we must first look at biblical principles. Jesus himself outlines the process in Matthew 18:15–20. Here we encounter a problem in the form of a textual variant. The NIV has “if your brother or sister sins...” but notes that some manuscripts have εἰς σέ, “against you.” Commentators are split about whether or not to include this variant. Some, such as John Nolland, vote against its inclusion. “εἰς σέ (‘against you’) has been treated as secondary. More important than its absence from key [manuscripts] is the better development through the discourse that is possible with the shorter text.”³⁷ Others, such as R.C.H. Lenski, opt to include it for the sake of the flow of this whole chapter. “ ‘Against thee’ is textually very strongly assured. The phrase indicates what sins are here considered; those of a general nature are treated in v. 10–14, here the sin is specified as being committed against a brother.”³⁸

Each commentator brings good points to the table, but they both agree that you cannot learn about brotherly admonition adequately without considering the surrounding context. John Nolland offers the following outline for this section, under the grand topic of “Status and Behavior in the ‘Royal Family.’”

- A. Preparing for the Fateful Journey to Jerusalem (17:22–23)
- B. God Does Not Tax, but Provides for His Children (17:24–27)
- C. Becoming as Children to Enter the Kingdom of Heaven (18:1–5)
- D. Avoiding Sin (18:6–9)
 - 1. Woe to Those Who Cause Little Ones to Stumble (18:6–7)
 - 2. ‘If Your Hand... Causes You to Stumble...’ (18:8–9)
- E. Dealing with the Sinner (18:10:35)
 - 1. ‘Goes in Search ... Finds ... Rejoices’ (18:10–14)

37. John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Paternoster Press, 2005), 745.

38. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, Lenski's Commentary on the New Testament (Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 698.

2. Challenging Sin with a Concern for Restoration (18:15–20)
3. Forgive Your Brother or Sister from Your Heart (18:21–35)³⁹

I disagree that A. and B. here are relevant to our discussion, as those accounts seem separate and don't add to understanding of the content of Chapter 18 as other sections do. However, the outline in chapter 18 flows well. Children of God have childlike faith (18:1–5), but none should take advantage of that childlike faith and mislead the believer (18:6–7). Then, Jesus speaks to how far the child of God should go to avoid sinning (18:8–9). However, when the child of God sins, that sin must be dealt with properly. That is when one of their brothers or sisters ought to engage in admonition with them.

The Proper Goal of Admonition

Just as a child of God will go to great lengths to avoid sinning, so too will they go to great lengths to restore their wandering brother or sister to the family of God. Before outlining the process of brotherly admonition, Jesus uses a parable to explain the aim of brotherly admonition.

“ ‘What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish’ ” (Mt 18:12–14).

Lenski states that this illustration “advances the thought to the spiritual help that the disciples ought to offer any of these little ones who may be endangered by going astray.”⁴⁰ The shepherd, who models his life after God, is not content to lose even one sheep, even though he already has ninety-nine. In the same way, the believer, especially the shepherd of a congregation, ought not

39. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 54–55.

40. Lenski, *Saint Matthew's Gospel*, 693.

to be content when one member begins to stray, whether he is a shepherd of ten, one hundred, or even one thousand souls.

Nolland sees the problem from a different angle. “To own a hundred sheep would be a mark of some wealth. But at whatever economic level one operates, one percent of one’s wealth is normally treated as significant.”⁴¹ From his point of view, it is not surprising in the slightest that the shepherd goes out to search for the one missing sheep. No matter how you look at it, this shepherd cares deeply about his sheep, as shepherds under Christ are to have great compassion for every member of their flock. As Dr. Schuetze wrote, “In the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (Lk 15), [Jesus] revealed how much heaven rejoices over the repentance of a single sinner.”⁴²

How does this apply to the next portion of Matthew and sorting out the variant? If our Father, the chief shepherd, “is not willing that any of these little ones should perish” (Mt 18:14), then the earthly shepherds he calls will seek to show that same love for his people. Is it possible for the pastor, or any believer, to show that degree of love by only confronting the brothers or sisters who sinned against them specifically? Nolland would prefer to leave the variant out. “...εἰς σέ (‘against you’) has been treated as secondary. More important than its absence from key MSS is the better development through the discourse that is possible with the shorter text. The focus will be personalised in v. 21, but for the moment it remains more general.”⁴³ He argues that, while εἰς σέ is present in more manuscripts overall, it is not present in Sinaiticus (Fourth Century AD), the oldest Greek manuscript we have, and Vaticanus (Fourth Century AD).

41. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 742.

42. John Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls*, 191.

43. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 749.

Additionally, verses 21–35 deal with forgiving your brother when he sins against you personally, in the parable of the unmerciful servant. Lenski argues for the variant, arguing that it “is textually very strongly assured. The phrase indicates what sins are here considered; those of a general nature are treated in v. 10–14, here the sin is specified as being committed against a brother.”⁴⁴

However, would it be damaging to only admonish those people who have sinned against you directly? As a pastor, I think that would not often be the case. How often will it actually happen that a sheep sins against his or her own shepherd? People would sooner sin against members of their own family than their pastor. How much opportunity, then, would a pastor have to admonish sin if he only acted according to this? Armin Schuetze and Irwin Habeck suggest that the pastor should not act only in this situation.

Any brother who sins is to be admonished. There are no restrictions. The “against thee” of Matthew 18 has weak textual support. To show concern only when we are hurt directly would ill reflect the attitude of the seeking Shepherd who wants none of His sheep to perish. To restrict admonition to cases of “mortal sin” (1 Cor. 6:9,10; Ga 5:19–21) is to fail to see in every sin a violation of the majesty of God which calls forth His curse and condemnation.⁴⁵

Not only do they give their opinion on the textual variant in 18:15, but they also show how the pastor should act according to biblical principles.

In the Old Testament, God did not call prophets because he needed them to confront a brother or sister who sinned against them directly or specifically. The prophets were called to confront the people about their sins, no matter whom they were committed against, because God cares about his people. Samuel confronted Saul when he decided to take it upon himself to sacrifice to the LORD before Samuel arrived (1 Sam 13:7b–14), and again when Saul failed to

44. Lenski, *Saint Matthew's Gospel*, 698.

45. Schuetze and Habeck, *The Shepherd under Christ*, 166.

completely wipe out the Amalekites (1 Sam 15:13–31). God called Nathan to confront David, who committed adultery with Bathsheba and killed her husband, Uriah (2 Sam 12:1–14).

Prophets like Isaiah and Hosea were called to admonish the Israelites, that they might turn from their evil ways. In the New Testament, Jesus, in his infinite knowledge, called out the Samaritan woman at the well for her sin of adultery (John 4). Paul rebuked Peter when he selfishly associated with Jews, neglecting the Gentile Christians (Gal 2:11–21). Scripture is full of examples of believers confronting people about their sin when, strictly speaking, it was not their business.

No matter which way the theologians lean when it comes to the variant in Matthew 18:15, each one speaks of the believer's or pastor's role in the context of the whole chapter. If one chooses to omit the variant, then the believer is called to confront his brother for any and all sin. If one chooses to keep the variant, brotherly admonition is to be carried out against the one who sins against you, but the context of the verses ought not to be ignored. Jesus encouraged his disciples, and us, not to cause any of these little ones to stumble. More than that, if we do see them stumble and stray, we are to do anything in our power to bring them back. No matter which way one sees it, Jesus wants his children to abstain from sin. And if they do fall into sin, it is the believer's duty and joy to admonish them and win them over for the sake of Christ.

Of course, the attitude by which this is done matters as well. When going ahead with brotherly admonition, the motivation is not to assure yourself that you are better than this sinner, for "he who keeps the whole law and stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (James 2:10). Neither is the goal to humiliate or embarrass your brother or sister, for we are encouraged, "do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping

it, but sitting in judgment on it” (Jas 4:11). These attitudes are harmful to your brother, not helpful. The only proper attitude with which to admonish your brother is love.

In this way, the sought-after goal of brotherly admonition should not be excommunication. Excommunication is a public proclamation that a person has been removed from the body of Christ. This is what Jesus refers to when the brother has rejected admonition time and time again. “...If they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Mat 18:17). In the context, pagans and tax collectors were not part of the Jewish community. The Jews disliked them and would not interact with them. This is where we receive our teaching about excommunication. Indeed, it is a very distressing thing when it happens, and for this reason, it must be avoided if possible! To excommunicate someone is not just to cut them off from the congregation, but an acknowledgement that they have willingly cut themselves off from Christ and all his blessings and benefits. It brings the pastor no joy to write such a letter or to announce such a thing to their congregation. Just as Christ was not willing that a single one of his sheep stray away, so the pastor should go to every length to restore one of his lambs to the flock of God. The reformer Martin Bucer puts it this way:

Now, since we cannot immediately know who have apostatized from the church of Christ to such an extent that they have completely and finally alienated themselves from Christ our Lord, we must apply the greatest diligence to bring back all those who have separated themselves from the church of God, whether this has happened through false teaching and so-called religion or through worldly and carnal excess, and leave no stone unturned until we have carried them too on our shoulders back to be with Christ’s sheep and in the whole communion of Christ.⁴⁶

Therefore, the question is not, “Who should I admonish?” but “Should I admonish a brother who sins?” And, in many cases, the answer is yes.

46. Martin Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, tr. Peter Beale (Edinburgh: Carlisle, PA : Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 93.

GOSSIP IN THE BIBLE

In order to understand what the Bible says about gossip, a study in the original language is necessary. The Bible uses different terms that the English usually renders as “gossip.” $\psi\iota\theta\upsilon\rho\iota\sigma\mu\omicron\iota$ is used to describe gossip in secret. BDAG offers “derogatory information about someone that is offered in a tone of confidentiality,”⁴⁷ adding the note that in the Greek literature we have (Biblical and extrabiblical) it is only used in a bad sense. The only use in the biblical canon is by Paul, where he expresses his concern over the Corinthian congregation. “I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, *gossip*, arrogance and disorder” (2 Cor 12:21). This form of gossip is prevalent even in Christian congregations. People may see it as harmless, as the defamatory information is shared only between a few people, but here Paul clearly condemns it. A noun form ($\psi\iota\theta\upsilon\rho\iota\sigma\tau\acute{\eta}\varsigma$) also exists in Romans 1:29, where Paul is describing the sinfulness of mankind, and that people such as gossips (rumormongers, tale-bearers), “although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them” (Rom 1:32).

There is an Old Testament equivalent as well, each of them found in Proverbs. The word for gossip is commonly associated with the Hebrew root נאנ . BDB offers the meanings “to murmur” or “to whisper.”⁴⁸ There is only one use in the *qal* form. Isaiah used it to describe rebellious people when he wrote, “Those who are wayward in spirit will gain understanding,

47. Frederick W. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1098.

48. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 920.

those who complain will accept instruction” (Is 29:24). The context here is negative, as, in this poetry, those who complain are compared with people who are wayward in spirit. To be corrected, these people will gain understanding and accept instruction. However, due to the context this complaint is not about another human, but the LORD.

All other uses of this root are in the niph'al form. In Psalm 106:25 and Deuteronomy 1:27, the root is used to describe the Israelite's rebellion against the LORD during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness. These grumblings are also not against other humans, *per se*, but against the Lord, as they were discontent with their current condition of life. We are particularly interested in the use of גָּלַל in the book of Proverbs. All the uses in proverbs are participles for “gossips”, that is, people who gossip. A gossip separates close friends just as a perverse person spreads conflict. (Prov 16:28). Just as a fire goes out without wood, so too a quarrel dies down without a gossip (Prov 26:20). In these verses, gossip is also treated as a bad thing.

However, 18:8 and 26:22 are difficult to understand. Both verses read exactly the same: “The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to the inmost parts.” You may think that a choice morsel is a good thing, as if the words of a gossip are desirable. And you could get this sense from 18:8, as the verse stands alone outside of context. However, 26:22 is part of a series of verses describing the danger of gossip, the aforementioned 26:20 being part of it. One aspect that makes this difficult is the word כַּמְתֵּלֵהִים, a verb used only in the *hithpael* form, only as a participle, in only these two verses. The verb root, according to most lexicons, has the meaning “to swallow greedily,” with this participle meaning “bits greedily swallowed.”⁴⁹

49. BDB, 529–530.

Most English translations of this verse fail to capture the sense of the original Hebrew. Many present the words of a gossip as “choice morsels,” or “tasty foods,” with seemingly no side effects as they go down into the innermost part of the body. Other translations use the words “wounds,” but then the metaphor is lost. However, one translation, *The Message*, captures the complete sense, though it has to heavily paraphrase: “Listening to gossip is like eating cheap candy; do you really want junk like that in your belly?”

When it is difficult to discern what Scripture says about something in one part of the Bible, we can go to other sections which talk about the same thing to obtain a deeper grasp on what God reveals to us. The previous verses in Proverbs certainly help our understanding of 18:8. It is important to know what the rest of the Bible says about gossip, specifically what is prohibited in the eighth commandment. Andrew Steinmann explains it this way:

This verse compares the temptation to break the Eighth Commandment to the appeal of delicious food. The commandment is violated both by the gossip who spreads rumors and by those who listen and believe the tales. The statement that the gossip goes down to one’s innermost being is a commentary on the profound and lasting personal corruption caused by gossip and the prejudice it creates.⁵⁰

Compare gossip with a fast-food burger. When you’re hungry, the burger looks good. It is available to eat almost immediately, with no preparation on your part except to pay for it. However, it is not very healthy, and if you eat them all the time, you may experience negative health issues in the long run. Gossip can similarly corrupt us. It may seem like something we want to hear, but it changes our perspective, causing us to see someone in a negative light even if they may be innocent.

While Anderson, who evaluated Thomas Aquinas’ philosophy of “just” gossip may argue that gossip is not a sin, I would disagree. I don’t think I could say that there is such a thing as

50. Andrew E. Steinmann, *Proverbs* (Concordia Publishing House: 2009), 393.

“just” gossip. Unfortunately, we live in a world where lies can be spread just as easily as the truth, and some are willing to use lies to defame someone they don’t like, even if they don’t deserve it, or if the report about them is not true. However, even if the allegations are true and the gossip serves mainly to protect, there is a better, more biblical way to protect others. It is better if a church member reports the problem to a pastor. If protection is needed, the pastor has a duty to report the offense to the proper authorities and then let the due process of the law determine the alleged offender’s fate. If, for some reason, one is prevented from seeing their pastor, and this one feels as though others may be in danger, a warning may be in line, but given in a way where the warning is genuine yet contains no unneeded details.

Gossip vs. Slander

Another relevant Greek word is καταλαλέω. In the simplest definition, it means “to speak ill of” but is commonly translated “to slander.”⁵¹ This verb and other forms of the word are written against by multiple writers in the New Testament. James encourages Christians not to slander one another, for if they do, they speak against and judge God’s law (Jas 4:11). In his first epistle, Peter classifies καταλαλέω as something that pagans are guilty of: “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Pet 2:12). Later he writes, “Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind” (1 Pt 2:1). He speaks against it again in 3:16. Along with gossip, Paul is afraid that he will find slander when he visits

51. BDAG, 519.

the Corinthian congregation (2 Cor 12:20). He also lists slanderers among the wicked men of the world (Rom 1:30).

The Hebrew equivalent is the noun רכיל. BDB gives the definition of “slander”, to be preferred over the translations “tale-bearer” or “informer.” This noun is often used with a form of the verb הלך, usually translated, “to go about in slander,” as a slanderer.⁵² The world does not see these two verbs, gossip and slander, as synonyms. According to Meriam-Webster, slander is “the utterance of false charges or misrepresentations which defame and damage another’s reputation.” One difference between the two can be intent. According to the world, gossip is harmless, idle chitchat containing information about another person, which may or may not be true, while slander is speech containing definite false information spoken with the intent to damage someone’s reputation. However, whether the intent is there or not, gossip almost always ends up ruining reputations as well.

Another difference between the two is the mode in which the information is made known. In gossip, the information is shared intimately between two or more people in a group. Slander is broadcast on a public platform. You may see this most clearly during governmental debates, when the candidates, rather than explaining their policies, decide to attack the character of their opponent instead. Even if the information is partly true, the truth can be bent to make another person look worse than you. This may also be seen in social media, in the form of cyber-bullying and cancel culture. Allegations are made on a website, which is available for all to see, in an attempt to defame another person. Sometimes the truth is clear, and cancellation is warranted (in the eyes of the world), but it is just as easy for an innocent party’s reputation to be slandered with

52. BDB, 940.

zero proof. However, even gossip, if left long enough, can become as widespread as information shared through slander. Once again, the end result is the same.

Despite these similarities, the world sees these two sins as distinctively different. Even though they view gossip as innocent, the Bible warns against slander and gossip alike. Slander is perhaps more dangerous, and the LORD rightly warns against it: “Do not go about spreading slander among your people” (Lev 19:16). However, as stated before, Paul also warns against gossip. They both go against the eighth commandment: Even though they may not be on the same level or degree in our eyes, they are equal in God’s eyes as a violation of this commandment.

Alfano and Robinson do not make a distinction between gossip and slander. Instead, they write, “...If the gossip is false, it creates a caricature of the subject as a villain or hero. Such caricatures may have value in the context of moral education, but one naturally worries that, even in the case of flattering caricatures, the speaker erects unfair or overly demanding expectations for the subject.”⁵³ In such a situation, these authors may not call it slander, but it is, because the intent is to defame someone using a lie. In the end, it doesn’t really matter if the lie was spoken quietly or out loud: the information will be widespread to ruin the subject’s reputation.

GUARDING AGAINST GOSSIP

Since gossip must be avoided, we must set up multiple barriers to prevent it from happening in the first place. The first line of defense is good preaching. It is completely possible

53. Alfano and Robinson, “Gossip as,” 476.

that a person, especially a visitor, might not know that gossip is a sin. For the unbeliever, to gossip is merely to make conversation. Most members will have gone through Bible information class and know just what is forbidden in the eighth commandment. But we must always remember that the life of a Christian is a struggle. The Christian is *simul iustus et peccator*, that is, he is at the same time a sinner and a saint. Though we have been saved by the merit of Christ and are no longer slaves to sin, we still have a sinful nature, always fighting against the new man given to us in baptism. It happens often that saints in a congregation will backslide, fall into temptation, and sin as they once did. The remedy for this is law and gospel. John Schuetze writes, “We need to share specific law with them. We show them from Scripture that they are sinning and that their sin threatens their eternal welfare. But once the law has done its work, we comfort with the gospel... An evangelical ministry does not just use law and gospel. It lets the gospel predominate.”⁵⁴ If the people are kept in God’s word in this way, the Holy Spirit will continue to work through them to lead a Christian life.

The next line of defense is the people themselves. When Jesus spoke to his disciples in Matthew 18, he was not speaking to them as leaders of the church on earth, but as children of God, fellow believers in him. Admonition is not the pastor’s job alone: it is the duty of every Christian! John Scheutze suggests, “...We as pastors should consider how we can educate our members in Christian admonition. Just as we equip them with faith-sharing skills or teach them to be good stewards, so we also need to instruct them how to admonish one another.”⁵⁵ This could also be done in preaching, but the concept could maybe be explained more thoroughly in a Bible study on admonition. Perhaps a committee or group could be formed in your church that

54. John Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls*, 193.

55. John Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls*, 190.

specifically focuses on seeking the straying sheep, whether they have not come to church for some time, or they are caught up in sin. It may not be fun or comfortable, but it ought to be done because it is the loving thing to do. “Christian admonition shows love for the straying brother or sister. It also shows love to those who may be tempted by the sin of others. It allows others to take warning. it keeps others from joining in the hypocrisy and being led astray.”⁵⁶

When gossip does happen in a congregation, however, and congregational admonishment is either failing or absent, the pastor must act. Before acting, the question that the pastor must wrestle with is whether this sin should be admonished publicly or privately. Armin Schuetze offered this encouragement:

In the case of 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... We shall ask ourselves which course in our judgment offers the best prospect of winning the guilty brother.⁵⁷

When possible and practical, private admonition may be the best way to go if you have the impression that gossip has not spread very far yet. In the case of a gossipy conversation between two or three members, it may be possible to make a quick comment, discouraging your members from unwholesome talk and reminding them of who they are in Christ: not a sinner who indulges in gossip, but a baptized child of God who seeks to use their words to build up their brothers and sisters. However, if there are multiple reports of this gossip throughout the congregation, a public announcement consisting of specific law and gospel would be best. Again, this admonishment can be done through preaching, although the pastor can determine whether that is necessary or if a post-service announcement or other kind of message would suffice.

56. John Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls*, 197.

57. Armin Schuetze, *Shepherd Under Christ*, 172.

If the pastor overhears the actual details of the gossip, such as the subject and what he or she has done, can he admonish that person? The answer is probably not. Especially if it is an isolated occurrence of gossip, the pastor should put that unwholesome talk out of his mind. Remember Martin Luther's advice: bury it! However, in cases where the gossip is widespread so that the whole congregation is aware, it may not hurt to talk to the subject. If they know everyone is talking about them, they may benefit from some one-on-one counseling, after all. In that conversation, the pastor will be able to decide whether admonishment is necessary or if the subject needs to hear the gospel instead.

Armin Schuetze recommended talking to a member if a the nature of his alleged sin is widespread public knowledge.⁵⁸ A sin can easily be revealed online, especially on social media websites. The best decision is perhaps not to have social media at all. While it is true that great ministry can be carried out on social platforms, we have no command that we must have an account on Facebook, X, Instagram, etc., to do that, or to keep tabs on members. Social media can be a great tool, but it is not a necessary one.

What if a pastor who has social media sees a sinful post from one of his members? There are multiple things to consider. First, accounts can be hacked. It is not always obvious when this happens, but internet experience and knowing your members will help. If the post seems like something your member would not say, it is probably not their post.

When you do see an unbiblical post from your member, it may not hurt to ask them about it. There is a chance they were not aware that having such a view or posting what they did was unbiblical. Doing this privately is incredibly easy, as most social platforms have private messaging features. Depending on the situation, this could be the whole conversation, or it could

⁵⁸ See pg. 28.

start a conversation that continues in person. Otherwise, the biblical principles of brotherly admonition still apply. If the sin is real, admonition must take place.

A Model of Rumor in Brotherly Admonition

In many cases, such as those listed before, the pastor will overhear gossip by his sheep. It is a different story, however, if a member approaches you privately and tells you, with a concerned spirit, of the sin of a brother. A member may know the words of Matthew 18 and know when admonishment is necessary. However, they may be afraid or unwilling to risk a good earthly relationship with the straying brother. Is it right for the pastor to get involved right away? Or, following the process outlined in chapter 18, should the pastor urge that Christian to talk to his brother first? First off, never forget how wonderful it is when a believer has true concern for the well-being of his fellow Christian! When such a person reports a sin of another member to their pastor, they ought not to be admonished, as their intent is clear. In such a case, even if this believer reveals his brother's sin, it is not done maliciously, but out of true Christian love. Such an action should be commended instead. If they have any sense of guilt from telling another person about this sin, let that be alleviated immediately. Let them know that, by reaching out to their pastor, they have done the right thing.

Next, take them to Matthew 18. Their concern for their brother is obviously present, just as the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to go after the one. However, action must come next. The straying sheep must be admonished. John Schuetze writes, "Who is the one who should do this one-on-one admonition? The simple answer would be the person who has been sinned

against or who has witnessed the sin.”⁵⁹ If possible, the pastor should not be involved until the second or third step of admonishment. There is always the possibility of a misunderstanding, and if there is, that is best cleared up between the sinner and his concerned fellow Christian. When it comes to admonition, you should never act on a hunch. If the pastor were to speak with the straying member first, there may be negative consequences. The member could lose trust in their pastor or in other members of the congregation. If the pastor suggested sin was present or accused the offender of anything, they could get defensive. “How could you?” “Who told you about this? They had no right!” This is best avoided if the one who experienced or witnessed the sin confronts them first. If the sinner shows further signs of impenitence, then the pastor may be involved in the next step, where two or three others admonish the sinner, and must be involved if the issue is brought to the church.

The concerned brother or sister may not desire to admonish. This is not for lack of care for their fellow sheep, but possibly because of fear or doubt. John Schuetze, using the advice of a Christian sister concerned for her cohabiting friends, writes,

What if this person is weak in this area of her Christian life and feels she cannot confront the person?... Now we are faced with two separate situations. One is building up the sister who is weak in applying Christian discipline. The other is recognizing that a fellow member is caught up in a sin. We do not want the weakness of one to prevent the admonition of another... Perhaps after additional instruction and encouragement, the woman will find the time and courage to confront her friend. If not, the fact is that we have another member who is caught up in the sin of living with her boyfriend... Perhaps there is a way that we as the pastor can confront the cohabitating person privately in order to lead that person to repentance.... the greater goal [is] the repentance of the brother or sister who has sinned.⁶⁰

59. John Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls*, 198.

60. John Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls*, 198–199.

The pastor should put effort into encouraging and educating his members to personally admonish their friend. But if they are unwilling or unable, the sinner must still be admonished. Whether this duty falls to the pastor, another staff member, or a member trained in admonition, that is up to the pastor to consider and decide.

Even in such cases, opportunities to admonish must not be ignored. When a brother or sister is acting in a way that threatens their eternal salvation, the pastor or witness cannot stand idly by and let their friend remain in persistent sin. It probably will not be comfortable or easy. But when souls are at stake, being uncomfortable for a moment should not deter the believer from seeking out his straying brother.

CONCLUSION

Brotherly admonition is not something that a pastor looks forward to carrying out. But it is a loving and necessary duty, not just for the pastor but for all believers. Scripture is replete with stories of people admonishing their brother, even if the sin was not against them directly. Pastors ought to educate their members about the dangers of gossip and the process of brotherly admonition. Though the world sees gossip as innocent or even as useful, it is always damaging to a person's reputation and is condemned in Scripture as a violation of the eighth commandment. Even if the gossip is protective, it would be better for a member to approach the pastor about their situation rather than gossip about their offender to other people. However, depending on how widespread the gossip has become, the pastor can use that gossip to tactfully and carefully approach the alleged offender to see if admonition needs to take place, or absolution if the sin is real and they are repentant.

When gossip happens within a congregation, the pastor must address it. Admonition can happen privately or publicly, as the pastor sees fit. His decision may depend on the severity of the gossip, whether it is an isolated occurrence or widespread through the congregation. Public admonition can be done by preaching or a post-service announcement. No matter how the pastor admonishes, it must be done by using the law to show that what was done was wrong, and by using the gospel to proclaim that this sin, too, has been forgiven by Jesus.

Social media can be a useful tool for ministry, but it is not a necessary one. When a Christian's sin is revealed on social media, the principles of brotherly admonition still apply. As the issue began online, the conversation can start there too, as the pastor can send a message online to question whatever his Christian brother or sister posted. From there, admonition or absolution can take place online or in person.

In all this, the pastor must remember that this does not all depend on him. We do not want to be legalistic, or this work may be despised or neglected. Our motivation is the love of Christ, who was not willing that any of his sheep should be lost. This love of Christ is also the source of our forgiveness, as it brought him to the cross where he atoned for the sins of the whole world. This is the comfort we get to share with our straying brothers and sisters. This is the gospel we have the opportunity to share with them, which brings life out of death. The pastor must remember that, even when he is doing such a difficult and uncomfortable task, he is a blessing to his congregation. God will bless the pastor in his efforts to provide admonition and absolution to his people.

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