STOP THE KILLING! (AGAINST FRATRICIDAL PUBLICATION)¹

Technological advance often outpaces ethics. Consider medical science, for example, where the expertise in extending “life” seems greater than the consensus about when and how this ought to be done. A similar problem arises in communications technology and social media. These introduce complex questions for our ethical consideration. This message begins to address a concern especially about publishing by means of blogs, while the biblical principles raised also have implications for circulated letters and physical books. Recent events have heightened our awareness of this need, but we intend a wide application.

And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him (Gen 4.8).

Speak not evil one of another, brethren (Jas 4.11).

But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another (Gal 5.15).

The dawn of human history witnessed a crime of epic proportions: brother-murder. As killing a man is homicide, and killing oneself is suicide, so killing a brother is fratricide.

Murder is heinous because every human being is created in God’s image. That makes murder an unspeakably wicked crime, because it is attempted deicide. The malice behind murder is not only horizontal but vertical, directed against the untouchable God through His vulnerable images in this world.

Fratricide or brother-murder is an especially loathsome species of murder because it is a gross violation of the special obligations that brothers have toward each other. Hateful Cain asked God insolently, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen 4.9). As a matter of fact, Cain, you are! Matthew Henry remarked here that

A charitable concern for our brethren, as their keepers, is a great duty, which is strictly required of us, but is generally neglected by us. Those who are unconcerned in the affairs of their brethren, and take no care, when they have opportunity, to prevent their hurt in their bodies, goods, or good name, especially in their souls, do, in effect, speak Cain’s language (emphasis mine).

Godly Abram knew that close kinship was a great incentive for peace, when he said to his nephew Lot, “Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren” (Gen 13.8), or, “we are kinsman” (ESV). Abram has physical kinship and physical strife in mind, but this principle applies even more urgently when the kinship and crimes are spiritual. Christian brethren are under the greatest obligation to love one another, and this precludes character assassination.

If and when pastors slander other pastors, this is especially evil for three reasons.

First, Scripture requires exemplary conduct from pastors. “A bishop then must be blameless” (1 Tim 3.2). We must be consistent, living illustrations of our Lord Jesus Christ’s own love and righteousness.

Second, a man’s reputation is a precious commodity, so the one who would rob him of this is a felonious thief. “A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold” (Prov 22.1). Would we tolerate inter-pastoral debits from one another’s checking accounts? Would there not be an outcry if any of us hacked into another

¹ This is an edited transcript of a sermon delivered in May 2014.
pastor’s bank account and stole thousands of dollars? It follows that there should be widespread recognition and denunciation of anything approaching online slander in tone or substance, which is worse than robbery.

Third, pastors wield the greatest influence for good or ill in the churches. A healthy church holds its pastors and their teaching in high regard. Slandering good men tends to undermine their influence, and this sets a bad, contagious example for the flock. Scripture says, “Everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6.40 ESV). Instead of reproving their people for evil-speaking, slanderous teachers set the pace. They tend to corrupt all their students.

Considerations like these from Scripture are important and relevant in times like these, and sadly, not purely theoretical. My thesis on this subject should hardly be controversial, but our judgment can become clouded in the heat of controversy. Let me state my thesis as plainly as I can.

Public, verbal attacks, whether by letters, blogs, or books, upon the reputation of any pastors in good standing, are wicked and ought to cease whenever they have been indulged.

If indeed my assessment is sound, then the word from the throne of God Almighty, who said, “Thou shalt not kill,” must be,

Stop the killing!

Let me briefly explain my longer thesis statement. By public I mean readily accessible to believers and unbelievers alike, and to people who have no legitimate and spiritual need to know. By verbal attacks upon the reputation of any pastors I mean derogatory ad hominem comments that can only tend to diminish whatever respect the hearer has for the men being criticized. I am not including respectful public interaction about doctrinal differences in my censure, nor benevolent reproof. Letters, blogs, or books are prime examples of media that may be circulated without any ethical consideration to restrict the number and identity of the readers. By pastors in good standing I mean men who are considered biblically-qualified and competent as pastors by true churches of Christ. By wicked, I mean these attacks violate the ethical standards of Holy Scripture and are therefore offensive to God and rebellious against the Lord Jesus Christ. By ought to cease, I mean that wherever it is found, publication of these things should cease and desist promptly. Blog posts should be deleted. Presses should stop and publishers should absorb the financial loss as a sacrifice for the good of the churches. Those who have sinned should make public confession, ask forgiveness of their readers, and practice godly communications in the future.

To avoid being misunderstood, I need to qualify what I am saying, and please note this well. Here we are dealing with a vast and complex case of casuistry. If he missed my qualifications, a reasonable hearer could absolutize my teaching and suspect that I object in principle to any reproof whatsoever of any pastor under any circumstances in a public forum, no matter how grossly and publicly that pastor has sinned. Indeed, I consider this sermon itself as an example of lawful, public reproof to whomever it fairly convicts. A reasonable hearer who overlooked my qualifications here and elsewhere in this message might also doubt that I would judge it proper ever to publish something of a vindication of a pastor who has been slandered. I want to go on record that my remarks should not be so extrapolated. This message is only an attempt to elaborate some initial biblical principles for application in these complex matters.

I have been meditating on these things for months, and there is much I would like to say. Many Scripture texts and biblical truths have a bearing on this complicated matter, but in a brief
message like this we can only survey some of the most important ones. Three aspects of this topic demand our attention: first, the light of biblical law; second, the lightness of potential excuses; and third, the way forward from this kind of moral mess. Of necessity we must deal with each sub-point only briefly, and the first part on biblical law will occupy most of our attention.

THE LIGHT OF BIBLICAL LAW

First, then, let us consider the light of biblical law, or more specifically, the moral law in Scripture. The 1689 London Baptist Confession teaches that this law “continues to be a perfect rule of righteousness after the fall,” and “does forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof,” and “is of great use to [believers] as well as to others, in that as a rule of life, informing them of the will of God and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly, discovering also the sinful pollutions of their natures, hearts, and lives, so as examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against, sin” (Chapter XIX, “Of the Law of God”).

Now while in Reformed thought the Ten Commandments are emphasized as a summary of this moral law, it is found throughout Scripture in many precepts and prohibitions, not to mention appearing in more subtle ways in other genres of biblical literature. For example, we see true righteousness on glorious display in the gospel narratives of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What follows, then, in no particular order, are a few aspects of biblical righteousness that are more pertinent to the matter at hand. May the Lord awaken every conscience by His holy Word, and sanctify us for His glory.

The Law of Love or Benevolence

Let us start with the law of love or benevolence. While “love” is a term that can encompass the whole Christian ethic, I am using it here in a more restricted sense to denote that spirit and conduct which intend the good of one’s fellow man. This is a duty we owe to everyone, especially to those of the household of faith, and by inference, even more to the spiritual leaders among us. Clearly this is God’s will for us.

Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law (Rom 13.8-10).

“Love worketh no ill to his neighbor,” or, it “does no wrong to a neighbor” (ESV). The word translated as “ill” or “wrong” seems to have the sense here of harm or injury (BAGD, LN 20.18). Please notice the universal negation, “love works no harm.” An ancient principle of bioethics is, in Latin, “primum non nocere,” and in English, “first, do no harm.” The wise physician makes a priority of considering the effect of any treatment on his patient. In general, a treatment that does more harm than good is ill-advised. Helping the patient and making him healthier is the goal. This same thing is true as a general principle in the spiritual realm. We should consider what effect our words will have on others, and “love does no harm.” The converse truth is that love seeks to help or benefit the other person in some way.

I am persuaded that a thoughtful, deliberate purpose to do the most good to all involved would diminish the communication sins of God’s people. Unethical attacks are an unholy malignancy in the body of Christ. When it comes to relations between spiritual leaders within the true church, our sincere benevolence must be conspicuous as a governing principle. Above all
others in the church, pastors should be models of love in relationships with one another! Hateful words hurled in public are hurtful words and do not promote the cause of Christ.

The Law of Forbearance

Differences of opinion and personal provocations are inevitable in churches full of the sinful people that we all are, and therefore we have a great need to be patient with each other. This inner virtue and relational practice is required in many biblical passages, but consider how it is stressed in Ephesians 4.1-2,

I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love.

A meek and quiet spirit is valuable in God’s sight in all His saints, not just women, because it is the spirit of Christ Himself (1 Pet 3.4; Matt 5.5; 11.29). When one is truly meek, he is slow to take offense and puts up a long time with all kinds of annoyances from his fellow believers, whether those arise from healthy debate within the bounds of orthodoxy, genuine or perceived faults in the ways situations have been handled in the past, or being overlooked in the work of ministry while others are more highly honored. Patience among Christian coworkers is like oil that keeps the working engine cool and helps it to run efficiently. Without it there is friction and overheating, and the whole thing is liable to fail.

The Law of Privacy

When it comes to matters of dispute among God’s people, Scripture cautions us in general to keep things as private as we can in resolving the problems. Here are a few passages illustrating this.

Debate thy cause with thy neighbour himself; and discover not a secret to another: lest he that heareth it put thee to shame, and thine infamy turn not away (Prov 25.9-10).

On this text, Allen Ross wrote,

It is best to keep personal quarrels private to avoid public shame. These verses also are in the form of an instruction with a motivation. The thought runs that if in an argument with your neighbor you reveal another man’s confidence, he who hears you will shame you and you will always have a bad reputation. To put it more directly, do not divulge secrets in order to clear yourself in an argument. The point involves damaging a friendship by involving others in a private quarrel (Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Vol. 5 [1991], emphasis mine).

In the well-known passage of Matthew 18.15-18, Jesus is more explicit about handling things in the context of a local church. His teaching implies a general principle that escalation of confrontations is very undesirable. If resolution is possible between two brothers alone, that is best. If not, then only one or two others should be brought in as witnesses, judges, and counselors, with every prayer and hope that the matter will be resolved and go no further. Only when both of these steps utterly fail should the whole local church be informed, and the implication is that even then we must be careful not to spread the bad news of a dispute any further than ethically necessary. I acknowledge that other biblical principles sometimes warrant informing others outside a local church in the interest of God’s glory and the church’s good.

The fact that someone else was the first to violate the proper bounds of privacy in a particular matter does not in itself justify open publication and give carte blanche permission to say whatever one will about it. There is always the danger that further public discussion will result in a wider than ethically necessary awareness of our shame. We must be exceedingly
cautious and be sure we have biblical justification for any reproof of guilty parties before the world. “The beginning of strife is as when one letteth out water: therefore leave off contention, before it be meddled with” (Prov 17.14).

The Law of Humility

A truly humble man is willing to be thought little of, and considered wrong, and even slandered and vilified, rather than lash out at others for vindication. Our Lord Jesus Christ exemplified this supremely. “When he was reviled, [he] reviled not again” (1 Pet 2.23). This kind of humility also restrains us from self-promotion, speaking well about ourselves to further our reputation and influence. Proverbs 27.2 pithily exposes that sin when it says, “Let another man praise thee, and not thine own mouth; a stranger, and not thine own lips.” This saying prohibits proud boasting as unrighteous and unbecoming in a man of wisdom.

The relevance of this is apparent from the tone of much blogging about controversies involving men and their ministries. It is not hard to find examples which clearly violate biblical norms. A couple of them in Proverbs teach us that wisdom and humility put a restraint upon the tongue. “A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back” (Prov 29.11). “The vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent ignores an insult” (Prov 12.16).

The Law of Testimony before the World

Paul rebukes Corinthian Christians for taking one another to court for settling disputes among them. He rebukes them because this blemishes the testimony of the Christian community in front of the world of unbelievers. The passage is 1 Corinthians 6.1-8:

1 Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? 2 Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? 3 Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life? 4 If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church. 5 I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren? 6 But brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers. 7 Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded? 8 Nay, ye do wrong, and defraud, and that your brethren.

Paul’s words are drenched in pastoral reproof. How dare you do this? “How dare you take your internal disputes ‘before the unjust,’ that is, unbelieving judges and the world, and ‘not before the saints,’ that is, within the bounds of your own local church?” After insisting that this particular local church is competent internally to resolve disputes of this nature, Paul complains that they air their dirty laundry “before the unbelievers” (v. 6). This is such a grievous thing that Paul says to them, “It would be better for you to tolerate real injuries in your midst than to wreck the church’s testimony (and thus diminish the good name of the Lord Himself) by these public disputes.” “Shame on you!” (v. 5), Paul says by the Spirit of God.

Of course our pastors have sinned in many ways. And often what seems a transgression would be seen in a much better light if the whole truth were known about what actually happened. But my dear brothers, malicious wrangling on the World Wide Web where every ill-disposed enemy of the Church of Jesus Christ can read it and use it against us is wrong, even where there have been real injustices. We must not send a massive shipment of military arms for free to the Devil and his minions! Love covers a multitude of sins, and so does zeal for the Lord’s glory and the world’s salvation.
Now there may be instances where public statements should and can be made
righteously, which unbelievers may regrettably hear, but we ought to never resort to such an
extreme measure unless other biblical principles absolutely constrain us to it.

The Law of Patience

The fact is that in this life there is no possibility of “setting the record straight” so that all
the guilty parties are properly shamed and punished while the Lord’s innocent servants are fully
vindicated. Only our Lord Jesus Christ, who knows everything perfectly, including everyone’s
motives—which are absolutely critical to a just judgment—is competent to make sweeping
judgments about who deserves praise or blame. The Lord knows that we are prone to “judge by
appearances” instead of “with right judgment” (John 7.24 ESV). Even a man’s judgment of his
own heart and ministry is not absolutely trustworthy, so how much less his assessment of
another man! We must patiently await Christ’s return and entrust judgment to Him, as Paul
urged in 1 Corinthians 4.4-5:

4 For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It
is the Lord who judges me. 5 Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time,
before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness
and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his
commendation from God (ESV).

Believe me, brethren, the Lord is watching, and Judgment Day will reveal the truth to the
glory of Christ with His faithful servants. We can—we must—wait until then for the full
vindication of the faithful.

The Law of the Golden Rule

What has been called “the Golden Rule” often brings amazing clarity to ethical decisions.
Found in several biblical passages (Matt 7.12; Luke 6.31), we could paraphrase it this way, “Do
unto others as you would have them do unto you.” James calls this principle “the royal law
according to the Scripture,” and says that if you really fulfill it, you are doing well (Jas 2.8).

Now I would ask any pastor who may be involved in attempts to shame his fellow
pastors, “Is this the way you would like to be treated by others?” I didn’t think so! No critic is
wholly innocent; who possibly could be? So why would we treat others worse than we want to
be treated? The most discerning people can easily see that pastors abusing pastors is very
wrong.

I had hoped to elaborate on several other aspects of biblical law:

- The law of peacemaking (“Blessed are the peacemakers,” Matt 5.9; “Let us therefore
follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify
another,” Rom 14.19).
- The law of a need to know (“Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy
people,” Lev 19.16; “A talebearer revealeth secrets: but he that is of a faithful spirit
concealeth the matter,” Prov 11.13).
- The law of presumptive innocence (“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all
things, endures all things,” 1 Cor 13.7 ESV).

But we have almost run out of time. I will be content with calling attention to one more
law of biblical righteousness.

The Law of Survival
Like Jesus, we pastors ought to be consumed with zeal for the well-being of His church. We should be and do what tends to her health, strength, and genuine prosperity. Promoting her edification, defense, and genuine growth in stature, usefulness, and multiplication throughout the world must be our great concern.

This is why all Christians, and especially pastors, must be governed by the law of church survival. Whatever tends to destroy the brethren must be wrong. Those who devour the sheep are wolves, not pastors who lovingly sacrifice themselves for the good of the sheep.

Perverse talk is one of the most effective ways to ruin the church, and so it is high on the list of evils to be avoided like the plague. As Paul said, “But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another” (Gal 5.15). We should avoid forming a circular firing squad!

THE LIGHTNESS OF POTENTIAL EXCUSES

It is proper that biblical law should have the preponderance of our consideration in these ethical matters, so the last two parts of this message are appropriately concise.

Consider next the lightness of potential excuses. The fallen mind is extremely inventive in rationalizing bad behavior. In the light of this principle, I would not be surprised if some were to raise various objections to my thesis.

First, one could make the excuse of history. “We need to have a history of these things so we do not repeat our mistakes.” Writing history is legitimate, but a true and faithful history of pastors and churches, for example, could be written without demonizing honorable men and ministries. Church historians are not exempted from the biblical laws I have explained and many more I have not mentioned.

One might offer the excuse of retaliation. “They started it, so they deserve what’s coming.” Even if I grant these two points, they do not allow for repaying evil with evil. Scripture explicitly condemns retaliation. “Recompense to no man evil for evil” (Rom 12.17). Frankly, this excuse sounds like what six-year olds say when mother tells them to stop fighting with each other. “He hit me first!” His bad behavior does not justify mine.

In controversies of this nature, three basic parties may emerge. First, there could be the malicious aggressor with his sympathizers. Others, offended, may gravitate toward a counter-attacker, even if he writes sinfully, because they agree with his point of view. Third, the most benevolent observers pray for an outbreak of peace. I stand in the third group and I would enlist as many as I can.

Curiosity could be offered as an excuse. “Whenever I travel around preaching, people ask me, ‘What is the problem between Pastor X and Pastor Y?’” And because of this kind of sinful curiosity, Pastor Z feels compelled to “spill the beans.” I can hardly believe any man of God would fall for this. The National Enquirer is a tabloid paper that used to have a slogan, “Enquiring minds want to know.” Anyone professing allegiance to our Lord Jesus Christ would be hard-pressed to justify anything that even remotely resembles a gossip rag.

The excuse of truth sounds noble. Offenders might boldly challenge their critics, “You show us anything that is not true in what we are publishing and we will correct it,” but that argument assumes a colossally-false premise that whatever is true may be righteously published. Anyone embracing that view, if he is not altogether wicked, would be suffering from a huge ethical blind spot.

Some might try the excuse of independence with the accusation of prejudicial favor toward the alleged offenders. Here is what I mean. Critics could feel justified because they are proving they have no ultimate loyalty to any particular man, and if we say anything in that man’s
defense, we might be judged as his lackeys, unprincipled fawners over a charismatic leader. In response I say that we do not have to slander a man to be independent thinkers, and that godly pastoral relationships preclude backstabbing. There is a way to disagree without resorting to public shaming.

I would briefly mention the potential excuse of good intentions. People could argue that a good end sometimes justifies admittedly regrettable means. Listen carefully, my friends. It is never, ever, ever right to violate biblical law. The God who gave it to us is infinitely wise, and He has given us a sufficient rule to govern our behavior. Faith leads us to obey God even when the consequences of obedience seem disastrous. It is never right to do wrong. Nothing is more important than God’s honor, and God is honored when we practice scrupulous conformity to His revealed will.

Sin is the greatest evil—greater than shame, greater than obscurity, and greater than martyrdom.

Finally, the promotion of formal church associations would be no excuse. Some strongly believe that biblical principle, a common confession of faith, and cooperative endeavor require formal church associations. Personally, I am not convinced of this, but I consider such associations to be a matter where very good men can differ charitably and peaceably. As such, it falls into the category of the “doubtful things” of Romans 14. Paul explains there how we can have unity in a church, and by implication, among the churches, where there is diversity of opinion on many controversial issues like this. But this much I know. Even if formal church associations were God’s will for us, they would not excuse public, verbal attacks, whether by letters, blogs, or books, upon the reputation of any pastors in good standing.

THE WAY FORWARD

Suppose that from a failure to appreciate these biblical truths many had sinned already, involving many people in their public misdeeds. What could and should be done? Let me briefly suggest the way forward in the light of God’s revealed will.

First, we must have ethical clarity about these things. “In thy light shall we see light” (Psa 36.9). With courage and conviction, we pastors need to shine the light of God’s Word on these matters until a strong, enlightened consensus dawns upon our churches and we recognize these God-dishonoring sins for what they are.

Second, we must combat these sins with all courage. The Holy Spirit exhorts us to “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them” (Eph 5.11). It has been no easy thing for me to preach as I have, but my conscience constrains me to bear this heartfelt witness against sin, whoever is guilty of it. Paul’s Christian principles demanded he write some pointed things, but he did it with love, many tears, and a broken heart. I trust my disposition is like his. Let all pastors faithfully teach and warn in this area of concern. It will help if we present a united front for holiness.

Third, God calls us to private confrontation. When Providence has brought us into a closer personal fellowship with an offender, we have a duty to go meekly to him and plead that he reconsider his ways. We must try to restore him spiritually (Gal 6.1).

Fourth, when there has been sin, let there be thorough repentance and forgiveness. We “ought to . . . forgive [the penitent], and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow” (2 Cor 2.7). However low the church’s condition, all is not lost. God’s Spirit is able to grant deep contrition and sincere reconciliation between aggrieved parties. The Savior is able to heal all the breaches among us. I know it is God’s will that these things should happen. Let us pray that they will.
Fifth, there should be ecclesiastical discipline for any stubborn offenders. Titus 3.10 says, “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him” (ESV). Should any pastor persist in slandering others even after faithful confrontation and calls to repentance, his own local church ought to relieve him of his office at the very least. Church members must not tolerate wicked pastors over them. “As for those [elders] who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear” (1 Tim 5.20). Where a church has the advantage of elder plurality, leadership in pastoral discipline is especially the responsibility of the other elders. May God either reform or remove the offenders!

Finally, I am calling for exemplary publishing from now on. “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Eph 4.29 ESV). The same verbal holiness is required of our writing as well. We really can preach the gospel, edify the brethren, and save our hearers without resorting to fratricidal publication. It is not only evil, but horribly counterproductive. Such controversies tend to be a draining distraction from giving ourselves wholly to our legitimate ministries as pastor-teachers. Let us not dedicate our time, intelligence, and energy to producing countless pages of malicious diatribes. Let us not give the devil a foothold among us! O, good Lord! Forgive us for any of this, and let us devote ourselves purposefully to Your holy service in the manner that pleases You. Amen.

Note: Please refrain from mentioning any specific pastors, churches, blogs, books, or associations in any follow-up comments. A focus on biblical truth in these ethical matters would be safest and most edifying.

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