

The Impact of a Teacher's Sin Upon the Community

by Irvin Himmel

Four words in the title of this article are defined for the sake of clarity. I want the reader to understand the thrust of this essay.

"Teacher" is used here of one who publicly imparts knowledge; an instructor who exerts a broad influence in the church and outside the church; a gospel worker such as a bishop or an evangelist. I include deacons under this term, although teaching is not necessarily a function of such servants.

"Community" refers to the people outside the body of Christ who reside in the particular area where a congregation is located; the general population of the town, neighborhood, or vicinity. I am not referring to the community of believers but to the people sharing common interests due to geographic location..

"Impact" means the force of impression; the effect or influence; power over the minds and conduct of others.

"Sin" is to be understood in the sense of a misdeed or wrong that attracts public attention. I am not referring to a secret or private transgression. I speak of sin in terms of a trespass, offense, or violation of God's law that involves others or is known generally; such an act as drunkenness, adultery, theft, child molestation, or embezzlement.

Teachers As Examples

Teachers in the church fill a role making it doubly important that a good influence be exerted. Outsiders tend to expect more of a leader than they do of others in the church. God expects preachers, deacons, elders, and teachers (such as class instructors) to guard against conduct that is unbecoming, and to remember that their force of impression on the public is weighty.

A bishop "must have a good report of them that are without" (1 Tim. 3:7). This is essential, not only at the time of his appointment, but throughout his years of service. If he acts so that his reputation in the community is damaged, the congregation's effectiveness in outreach is hindered. Corruption in the conduct of a shepherd gives the flock a bad name.

Paul admonished the preacher Timothy to keep himself pure (1 Tim. 5:22). He told the

young evangelist to take heed to himself and the teaching, for in so doing he would save himself and his hearers (1 Tim. 4:16). Titus was told to be "a pattern of good works" (Tit. 1:7). That would leave no evil thing for others to say of him. Obviously, the preacher's influence on outsiders as well as believers is brought into focus in these passages.

Teachers Who Sin Leave Ugly Scars

When a teacher or church leader goes bad it may take years for the congregation to overcome the evil effect produced on the minds of people in the community. A teacher who sins openly has disgraced himself and the cause he represents in the public mind. The community may not be as charitable as the Lord in forgiving and forgetting. It is true that the whole church should not be judged by the misdeeds of an immoral preacher, or a deacon who acts unrighteously, or an elder who falls into sin, but a community often talks more about one rotten leader than the good folks who have not disgraced the Lord's name. This is the case especially in smaller towns where everybody knows everything that occurs.

W.E. Brightwell once said in his succinct style:

A dishonest or cowardly preacher is the most inconsistent, excuseless, and senseless thing of which one can conceive. Few start crooked. Should we force every one entering the ministry to sign a pledge that if he ever feels himself slipping in faith or moral integrity he will voluntarily give up preaching? He could do that much for religion - he could quit preaching! Anybody who has ever preached should have that much respect for religion.

It is too much to expect preachers to be stronger than other Christians. I suppose they can be forgiven as readily as others for disgracing themselves. But what a terrible doom must await the preacher who disgraces his religion along with himself! ("The Notion Counter," Gospel Advocate, Dec. 9, 1937). Years ago, quite by accident, I learned of a preacher who had run up bill in a certain city then left without paying them or making any arrangements. He moved to work with a congregation with which I had formerly worked. I felt compelled to write to one of the brethren and inform him of this, but for some reason he withheld the information from the rest of the church. I understand that the preacher pulled the same stunt in that community, leaving the church with a marred reputation.

Overcoming the Impact on the Community

How does a congregation overcome the influence of an ungodly teacher? If a deacon is arrested for a felony and the newspaper publicizes the affair, how does the church handle the problem? If a preacher commits adultery, how can the church deal with the situation to minimize the bad impact on the community? If an elder who happens to be the church treasurer appropriates church funds to his personal account, what course shall be followed for the sake of preserving honor in the community?

These questions are easier to ask than to answer. The reader is offered the following suggestions to consider:

(1) **Make efforts to bring about repentance and restoration.** Any Christian who sins needs to repent. The teacher or leader may need admonition, rebuke, and warning just as anyone else may need help from others in being brought to repentance. Concerning elders, Paul said, "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear" (1 Tim. 5:20).

(2) **Forgive the penitent.** Our obligation to extend forgiveness applies to all who have repented. The sins of teachers are not to be treated as if unpardonable. A congregation may be stunned and shocked if it becomes known that an elder has committed adultery with one of the sisters, but if they repent we must forgive them.

(3) **Withdraw from the unrepentant.** The brother who sins and refuses to repent, whether church leader or not, must be marked and avoided if we are to carry out the - teaching of the Scriptures. Teachers are not exempt from the rules of discipline outlined in the New Testament. If the sinful person skips town, as some preachers have done when they refused to meet their financial obligations, the church should warn others of their misdeeds.

(4) **Do not resort to cover-up.** A preacher who becomes immoral always hurts the church. The impact of his wickedness on the community will not be lessened by attempting to sweep the whole mess under the carpet. If the church acts according to the Scriptures in disciplining him, this will help to preserve the honor of God's people. If withdrawal becomes necessary, it should not be done in secret. The church must let the community know that sin is not condoned, even in the lives of leaders who have been highly respected.

(5) **Re-evaluate qualifications for leadership.** The teacher who sins may repent and be forgiven, but the effects of his wickedness are not automatically erased. One's damaged reputation may make it inadvisable that he continue in the position of leadership which he has occupied. For example, a preacher who commits adultery may be forgiven and restored to the Lord, but if his reputation in the community is ruined he is wise to (1) quit preaching publicly, or (2) move to some place far-away. Forgiveness of a sin does not blot out the consequences of the act, and forgiveness will not cancel injury to reputation that bears on eligibility for effective impact on a community.

When a teacher goes bad, and it is happening over and over, the faithful must re-double efforts to maintain purity. Let us all walk humbly and circumspectly, considering ourselves lest we be tempted.

Guardian of Truth