

Q4: “I did have a question for you concerning the issue of Christian pastors and leaders. I heard and agree with what you said in the teaching on murmuring. But are there times when leadership is actually “corrupt” in some sense and should be blamed for problems in the church. We are going through serious issues along these lines in our church.”

A4: Pastors and other spiritual leaders are often the subjects of ridicule, gossip, and backbiting. For this reason we should be slow to accuse them, especially in a public way. Just because we see something differently from the pastor doesn’t mean we should make an issue of it. This is true when the disagreement is concerning something relatively minor. However, your question is referring to something more serious, that you call “corruption”. There are different kinds of corruption – financial, sexual, doctrinal, administrative, etc.

Anything that would be seen as corruption in a legal sense (extortion, embezzlement, sexual harassment, threats of violence, etc.) must obviously be exposed and the church must be cleared of all involvement, so they do not become accessories to crime. Anyone accused of such things should be confronted and the truth must be established beyond doubt. This means an internal investigation of some sort, not a civil or criminal trial (that may be necessary separately). The guilty parties must be identified and removed from all positions of influence as soon as possible. The church as a whole should be given whatever details of facts as are prudent, and explanation should be given that “pastor X is no longer affiliated with this church”. Care should be taken not to make any statements that cannot be backed up by proof, or could open the church to charges of libel or slander in a subsequent court case.

What about doctrinal corruption? Pastors and seminary teachers often obtain a position by professing agreement with Biblical teachings and a church’s statement of faith, and yet over time it becomes obvious that they do not agree and are actively or deviously teaching contrary to Biblical truth. This is obviously dishonest. If they have a disagreement they should be open about it, and not be “slipping in the back door”. This is perhaps part of what Paul warned the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:29-30, “For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.” Jude 3 says we must “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints”. If men arise that teach heresies concerning the doctrine of Christ, or other fundamentals of the faith, they should be rebuked and removed from ministry. Explanation should be made available to the church, so people are not made to wonder, or to start up the rumor mills. No explanation is due to outsiders (people not members of the church).

I Tim. 5:19-20 provides some illumination for what to do when elders (pastors, bishops) are accused – “Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses. Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear.” From this we see:

1. Do not believe every accusation against church leadership. The devil loves to attack the church and its teachings by bringing reproach upon the leadership. For this reason, any accusation should be corroborated by at least two witnesses, to avoid a “he said, she said” conflict where we don’t know who to believe. (This would be wise advice for all conflicts, not just against elders.) Even then we must be wary, because it is common for disaffected complainers to unite and gang up on a pastor they don’t like. The implication is that the two or three witnesses must be truthful and valid witnesses, not just people who can tell consistent lies.

2. The followup is verse 20. In cases where the wrong-doing proves to be true, the sinning elder should be publicly rebuked. This is because elders hold a public responsibility in leadership, and if they use that position for personal gain or some other nefarious purpose, it is an especially egregious sin. They have not only personally sinned against God, but also against the church they were supposed to be tending (as a shepherd over a flock). They have also given fodder to the outside enemies of the church, and brought the church into contempt in the eyes of the world. This can hinder people from being converted, by accusations of “hypocrisy in the church”, etc.

So we must be very careful when accusing an elder of any wrongdoing, to verify the validity of the complaint, but if true, the offending elder should be rebuked publicly, and in especially serious cases, removed from authority in the church.

There are also cases where an elder has not committed any outright sin, nor held to false doctrine, but is ineffectual in his responsibility, or shows a lack of concern or effort in leading people to fulfill their own ministries. Eph. 4:11-12 says God has set leaders in the church (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers) for the perfecting of the saints for the work of their ministry. If they are unable or unwilling to do that, then we (and they) should question their calling to ministry. In 2 Tim. 2:2, Paul told Timothy to commit the teaching of the things Paul had taught to faithful men, who would be able to teach others also. There needs to be a faithful perpetuation of the word from generation to generation, and from an existing church to new Christians. Men who do not perform well in leadership should not be cast out of the church, but maybe they should realize that their interests, calling, and abilities do not justify continued leadership. In fact, it may be personally dangerous for them to do so, since they bear a real responsibility for the flock under their care. Such men should be allowed to step down from leadership gracefully without public embarrassment, and to continue as any other member of the church. If they refuse to step down or to function as a real elder, then it would be necessary to explain publicly to the church that they are being removed from leadership, but that they are welcome to stay in the church if they are willing. This should be done as lovingly as possible, but human nature being what it is, the person will probably elect to leave the church rather than feel humiliated. It should be made clear that they are not being forced out of the church, and that if they leave it is by their own choice. They should be prayed for, that they have a change of heart.