

Reproving an Older Believer for Sin

He had worked hard in the life of the church. He was highly respected and loved by his fellow believers. He also had an excellent reputation in the community. Added to these things he was a generous man, and so when he bought a new computer he gave his old one, which was only a couple of years old, to the pastor. That is when his porn habit was discovered. The pastor was shocked and concerned but reluctant to take any action, not even to have a quiet word with the brother which may have helped him to address his problem. He made excuses for the obvious facts before him and convinced himself that older people don't do that sort of thing, so he remained silent. The fact is that older people do do that sort of thing!

Reproof is a vital and valuable pastoral ministry, enabling individual believers to keep themselves "pure and unspotted from the world", and also to keep the Christian fellowship pure and careful about sin:

"You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbour, and not bear sin because of him" (Leviticus 19:17).

"Strike a scoffer, and the simple will become wary; rebuke one who has understanding, and he will discern knowledge" (Proverbs 19:25).

There is a further consequence of judicious reproof – it reveals the true state of a person's spiritual condition. Proverbs is clear:

"Do not correct a scoffer, lest he hate you; rebuke a wise man, and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a just man, and he will increase in learning" (Proverbs 9:8-9).

In practice, however, reproof seems to be mainly honoured in the breach. Indeed, in our culture it may be felt to be out of place:

*"In self-esteem cultures, pastoral rebuke may be a paradoxical and unwelcome notion."*¹

So pastors and church leaders may be tempted to hold back on this plainly biblical ministry rather than do something that their congregation might object to as being intrusive, too directive and lacking in empathy and understanding of people. Such objections are not unusual.

Of course, we do not go looking for people to rebuke, or for sins to expose, but when they become known, either to someone as an individual or publicly to the whole community, then action needs to be taken with due caution and care. We cannot escape the emphasis on it in the Bible. Paul states the principle:

"Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear." (1 Timothy 1:20)

And then Paul gives careful instruction to Timothy that rebuke is to be administered tenderly and appropriately:

"Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, with all purity." (1 Timothy 5:1-2)

In addition, believers are encouraged in Galatians 6:1 to gently restore brothers who fall into sin:

"Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness."

¹ Bob Yarborough, quoted in Dan Doriani, "Reproof is a Pastor's Gift of Love", <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/reproof-pastors-gift-love/>

In similar vein the Apostle encourages those in ministry to be gentle and careful in correcting those (believers and unbelievers) who have become ensnared by temptation:

“The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.” (2 Timothy 2:24-26)

Such care and concern is to be part of the church’s normal practice; reproof has a restorative and strengthening element that the whole congregation need to know. Tactfulness and compassion are essential aspects of a godly ministry of correction, but with them must come courage and earnestness for the truth and the well-being of those affected.

The injunction in 1 Timothy 5:1-2 addressed to Timothy as a younger man to be cautious in his dealings with young women would generally be recognised as wise and sensible by most believers. And there is common sense in the advice about approaching younger men as brothers, rather than in an authoritarian or overbearing way. But the implication that older people, men and women, have a need to be rebuked and corrected is somewhat surprising. But Paul raises the issue with Titus as well:

“But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine: that the older men be sober, reverent, temperate, sound in the faith, in love, in patience; the older women like waist, that they be reverent in behaviour, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things.” (Titus 2:1-3)

So clearly there is an issue here that seems to get overlooked in our modern church life.

There is a whole set of consequences from this neglect. Principally they cover the impact in the church where known sins in older people are overlooked, there is also the care for the older person who may need counsel as well as correction, and inevitably there is an impact on the testimony of the church before the watching world. Personal experience testifies to this latter point: The adverse impact of a failure to reprove and counsel an older brother whose public behaviour brought the gospel into disrepute was grieving to experience as unbelievers spoke of the man’s sin and laid the blame firmly at the church’s door.

The reality that we have to face is that the Bible very clearly teaches that there are specific sins which affect older people. Examples include:

- Stubbornness and a refusal to listen to good advice, and many families know it too well (Ecclesiastes 4:13).
- Deprecating the present while glamourising the past (Ecclesiastes 7:10)
- “I can’t change at my age”. The Word of God changes us whatever our age because the Spirit knows no limits to his transformative power. To deny this is sinful and needs tender attention (Titus 2:3)

There are, in addition, aspects of ageing that can partly account for these blemishes on godly lives. Often these factors arise because of an absence of teaching about the nature, dangers and challenges of growing old in a fallen world. They fall into three categories:

- Reaction to the loss of self-image and significance – in our culture older people are devalued, and that has a significant impact on the older person’s understanding of themselves. Often in church life older people and their still valuable gifts are not used simply because of their age. (There does come a time when, due to a person no longer functioning well, they may need gentle persuasion to step down from some activity). But not being used does not excuse the sinful attitudes and behaviours that may arise. It does show the wisdom of Paul in encouraging Titus to teach older men and women what the Bible says and so to address their behaviour patterns.
- Reassertion of unmortified sins – pride and self-promotion, lust and inappropriate desires all plague us throughout our lives. When the heart and mind are not focussed and stimulated to godliness then sins

reappear. Similarly, when the mind is exposed to sinful values through unadvised reading materials or television then sin revives.

- Disappointment and frustration associated with social, physical and intellectual losses that usually attend ageing. With them come the temptation to fall into bitterness, undue regret, recrimination and a host of other wrong attitudes.

We also have many examples in the Bible of older people falling into sin in later life – Noah (drunkenness), Moses (impatience and anger), Miriam (rebellion), David (misuse of time, lust and adultery, and murder), Solomon (disobedience and idolatry), Joash (idolatry and conspiracy to murder), Uzziah (pride), Zechariah (disobedience). Others could be added. The sad fact is that their fall into sin in their later years illustrates the vulnerability of older people. It is also important to see how in many of these cases the sin of the older person had serious impacts on others. The necessity of appropriate public ministry and private counselling by pastors and church leaders is surely emphasised by this. Satan is subtle and ignorance of the dangers is a key aid in his malevolent purposes.

The glorious truth is that God accepts us in Christ as we are at conversion, but then he changes us. All believers are being conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29), and all believers are to know the transforming work of God in their minds (Romans 12:2). So it is inconsistent with gospel care to leave people alone when we see them engaged in sin, which may harm others and will most certainly harm themselves.

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