



20 March 2012

Mr. Stephen Amato  
33 Cambridge Road  
Woburn, MA 01801

Steve,

We presently find ourselves at a place in which we hoped we would not arrive and have endeavored, with great effort, to avoid.

You have been attending HCC for about 12 years. During that time, you have led the Chinese Bible study group and been active and faithful in the Wednesday night Bible study group. You have come alongside several men in order to disciple them, and have been generous with your time. Furthermore, you have been willing to serve practically in a variety of ways within the HCC community, such as serving in the sound booth on Sunday mornings, and during community service days to serve those in need.

However, throughout this period, you also have been involved in several incidences in which people have been hurt by you, either by the content of what you have said, or by the manner in which you have spoken. Some of those incidences have come via direct interchange in the course of being part of the same local church community, while others have come indirectly through the reading of your website. In those instances, we have encouraged those offended to respond to those matters directly with you in accordance with scripture; and while some have chosen to do so, others have not. In some of those instances in which those offended have spoken with you, there was apparent healing. However, in other instances, there was not. Therefore, approximately 18 months ago, we felt increasingly compelled to reach out to you in love, especially after Todd heard your words to the effect that “one of the things you like about HCC is that we leave you alone and we do not interfere with your ministries.” We hoped along the way that the communication difficulties of the past would no longer be present so that your gifts could be more widely deployed and received throughout the HCC community.

On February 1, 2011, Michael contacted you via e-mail to request to meet for fellowship but also to address the issue of “periodically causing unnecessary offense when sharing / expressing ... thoughts.” The following Sunday, you and Michael met, during which this issue was raised and discussed. A few months thereafter, during the Spiritual Gifts Sunday School series, when an opportunity arose in class for someone to teach an Adult Sunday School class over the summer, you volunteered. After the elders discussed and prayed over this possibility, we decided to invite you to lead the class. Over its duration, as elders, we

attended when we could. Overall, we believed that the class went well and, despite you not being a formal member of the church, we decided to invite you to co-lead one of the two scheduled fall Adult Sunday School Classes with either Todd or Michael.

We have always known that you hold strong views on how to handle the word of God – and so you should. You call yourself a “Berean,” for which you have a particular definition. The idea of being “Berean” may be interpreted differently in its practice, but at its core it is the desire to search the word of God deeply for truth and not to be easily persuaded by others without independent study. That said, we do not believe that you are the only Berean among us; e.g., Michael and Todd would both specifically use that term to describe themselves. Ultimately, you expressed a preference to co-teach 1 John with Michael, and thus, while we have learned that co-teaching is challenging for all leaders, we felt confident that your longstanding relationship with Michael (a fellow “Berean”) would serve as a good foundation to overcome any challenges.

Unfortunately, we did not anticipate the three issues which emerged.

First, in the course of your teaching it became clear that you and Michael hold different views on the purpose and meaning of John’s first letter, as well as different views from a number of people in the class on issues that were raised in the class – most of which falls within the realm of orthodoxy. Although your view is essentially a subset of Michael’s view, you could not personally endorse some elements of Michael’s teaching. There is no problem with that finding.

However, the second issue that became clear was the style and manner in which you worked through those issues as a classroom teacher, i.e. you were perceived as adversarial and disdainful of views other than the one that you personally held. For example, in one such incident which occurred after class with an HCC member on October 23, 2011 (witnessed by Michael), you followed-up via e-mail the next day and stated that “reckoning such differences to be trivial ... has typically been the case at HCC ... those who are too uncomfortable with 1 John don’t have to show up. They can join (the basics of Christianity) class and simply sweep the 1 John class under the rug.” Therefore, Michael requested to meet with you to discuss the two issues of “communication and representation,” which you and he did on October 26, 2011. During that time, of which you were provided with a written record, Michael clarified that as a Sunday School teacher you’re not only representing yourself, but the entire elder team, such that your communication needs to be used for edification, in love, with a focus on unity, for the simple sharing of knowledge can puff up, become like a clanging symbol, and cause unnecessary division.

Michael then requested that you meet with the offended person and reconcile (a request that Michael independently made with the offended person as well, who himself to his own admission was partially at fault for the incident). Three days later, however, after sending you a request to review Michael’s notes for the following 1 John class, you, for the first time in this 1 John series, stated in an e-mail (sent to three elders and another HCC member) that you “take issue with much of what (Michael has) been saying in all (his) lessons so far.” While that in and of itself is not a problem, rather than initiating a dialog about the text, you chose to insinuate that Michael intentionally “mishandle(s) the Word of God so as to accomodate (sic.) the diversity of beliefs in HCC, keeping people in the dark so that they have no basis for taking a stand on one (view) or the other.”

Therefore, after consultation with other elders, Michael requested to meet and discuss what he labeled as an “idle allegation,” in accord with Matthew 18:15, *the primary goal of which is reconciliation*. Subsequent to this, on October 31, 2011, you then further stated via e-mail that Michael is probably just incompetent, he “just doesn’t pay attention,” he “doesn’t listen,” and that his “ego” was his “stumbling block.” You and he met thereafter on November 6, during which you reiterated and expanded upon your insinuations, as well as refused to believe that Michael had a legitimate concern.

It is this second issue – the style and manner in which you operate - that became a matter of concern for us as shepherds of the church. Michael’s attempts to speak into this issue (on our behalf) were not received as they should have been. Accordingly, with both great deliberation and great regret, we felt that we had to defer your teaching until we could meet with you in person at our next regularly scheduled elders’ meeting.

You regarded our deferment of your teaching as an offense against you. This, in turn, led to our observation of a third issue, namely, how a brother reacts to a perceived offense. Ever since then, this third issue has become, for us, the core issue.

We invited you to a regularly scheduled elders’ meeting on November 17, 2011 to have an in-person dialog with you about the deferral of your teaching of Sunday School, pending the outcome of that dialog. However, this meeting failed to be a dialog. In fact you came to the meeting on the offensive and incorrectly perceived it as “The HCC Excommunication Trial of Steve Amato.” The document you read to us that evening revealed to us your opinions about us as elders, namely that you view us as intentionally mishandling the word of God, that we are all corrupt and as a consequence have corrupted Michael Bradford (whom we wrongly ordained as an elder), and thus you cannot accept as legitimate our overseeing authority as elders. At the end of your monolog, completed with a handout, you specifically mandated that no oral communication would be permitted from us - in the meeting or thereafter: you would only accept written responses.

Despite failed attempts to invite in-person dialog with you following the meeting and by phone, we realized that the only way that you would receive our response was in accordance with your dictum. We, therefore, were obliged to send you a letter (appended, p.7) on November 18, 2011. In this letter, we expressed our concerns and addressed the reasons for removing you from Sunday School teaching responsibilities.

Since then, we have tried repeatedly to resolve this issue with you. After the meeting at your home (December 5, 2011), we thought that we had amicably resolved it. But within a few weeks it had returned. So, again we responded with an attempt to reconcile.

However, our efforts to move forward positively have been consistently received by you as “disingenuous.” In countless email exchanges you have rejected invitations for in-person dialog and wrongly received every message as part of a master plan to evict you from the church. You frequently have referred to us as “you people,” and have described us as “corrupt,” “malicious,” “deceitful,” “duplicitous,” and “conceited.” Along the way, you have specifically likened yourself to both Jesus and Paul in bringing judgment upon the “religious elite” that you consider us to represent.

Nonetheless, we had hoped that you actually desired to amicably resolve this issue. Therefore, on Thursday, March 15, 2012, we sent an email attempting again to clarify your ongoing misunderstandings and to state again our recently expressed desire to find a mutually agreeable mediation panel to bridge the ongoing challenges between us.

However, after sending that email, it came to our attention that you had already published on your publicly accessible website much of the content of this matter. This posting (appended, p.9), dated from late November 2011, offered us new insights into your thought processes concerning these events. It appeared to us that you were not genuinely seeking reconciliation but had already decided on the outcome that would include a public airing of these views, including your cited charges against the elders. Accordingly, on the following Saturday (March 17) we emailed you to ask you whether you still considered this posting to represent your thinking. Although you have since deleted this document from your website, you replaced it with a new document, though this time thankfully in a secure section of the website requiring a password. However, no significant positive change in sentiments on your part toward sincere reconciliation was evident.

Furthermore, we had been aware of another posting on your website regarding church leaders (appended p.24 <http://www.bcbsr.com/topics/institute.html>). Therein, as an example, you specifically state a presupposition that “institutional church leaders” are easily susceptible to conceit and corruption, and thus exhort your readers to come against all “institutional church leaders” in order to expose their hypocrisy. You go on to state that, if thereby your readers are expelled from the church (“crucified”), they are to be offered “congratulations.” Therefore, on Saturday March 17 we also asked you as to whether or not you continue to hold those views, and you have responded affirmatively with no intent of mollification. This posting has helped us to understand your predisposition of distrust toward us as elders of an “institutional church.”

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This unfortunate process has enabled us to gain some important insights. First, for reasons beyond our understanding, you appear unable or unwilling to see our love for you and our desire for a healthy resolution to this matter. Second, when you perceive yourself to be wronged, you go on the offensive in a manner that is not becoming of a servant of Christ. You do so in the name of “truth” but with a complete absence of “love.” Third, while we recognize that you are not a member of HCC, you are unable or unwilling in any way to accept our overseeing authority as elders of HCC, which obviously is required of all those who teach at HCC. In fact (to the best of our knowledge) you do not hold yourself accountable to any overseeing authority. We would note that we ourselves are accountable to the other elders and to the church membership, in accordance with scripture.

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Steve, as we understand it, there are two primary issues from your point of view.

First, your zeal for the truth of the word of God and your approach as a “Berean” (*as defined and practiced by you*) has led you to be deeply concerned regarding trends you believe present in HCC, namely that we are on the slippery slope toward Unitarian Universalism.

While we heed the warning, we believe this is a distortion of what we are requesting and modeling, namely, that within the realm of Christian orthodoxy that reveres the word of God as authoritative with equal zeal, brothers in Christ periodically come to differing opinions. You and we likely have a different view as to the width of the bands that constitute acceptable “orthodoxy.” At HCC, elders and members hold differing views on a number of doctrinal issues - each believed to be supportable under the high view of scripture. Therefore, as we individually teach, we need to declare what we believe individually in a manner that does not disrespect the views held by another elder or member.

Second, you believe that you have been grievously offended through this process. In particular, you believe that we should not have deferred your teaching without a meeting with you prior to that deferral. This represented an action that you perceived as a public humiliation of you personally. Furthermore our decision not to make known to the church all that had transpired and was transpiring in the process, further deepened this sense of betrayal. Again, for the record, we do understand the manner in which our hearts work and we do understand and regret the pain that this has caused you.

These are the two primary issues from our point of view.

First, this all started with a desire in us to reach out to you in love. Despite that, we failed to do what we should have done in late August 2011. As we have already acknowledged to you, we should have sat down with you and discussed how we expect teachers to navigate their way through differences of interpretation. We are a non-denominational, independent church that contains members and elders from different denominational and theological backgrounds. As such, we are going to differ somewhat in our interpretations of what the word of God says within the realm of Christian orthodoxy. Provided that the views held are within the realm of the elders’ collective sense of Christian orthodoxy (which certainly can be respectfully challenged), we try to lay out those differing views and encourage members to examine the scriptures for themselves. Within a few weeks of your teaching, we learned that, given what it means in practice for you to be true to *your view* of how a Berean should conduct himself, it would be better if you did not teach the adult Sunday school class. Our failure to have that conversation with you in August was a mistake and we apologize to you again.

Second, this event has shown us that you are unable to respect us as elders and unable to receive correction. If we were to do this over again, we would have worked harder to avoid asking you not to teach until after we had been able to talk this through with you. There are reasons (noted previously) that led to our decision to request a deferral of your teaching before our conversation and we reluctantly chose to proceed the way we did. We acknowledge that our action was, and remains, deeply hurtful to you, for which we express genuine regret.

Despite this, you have made it impossible for us to reconcile with you on any terms other than those specified unilaterally by you, which are based largely on a distortion of what has transpired. Perplexed to the core as to how we should then proceed, we eventually suggested a mediation process. However, the events of this last week and our learning of your expanding of this into a public forum outside of the church *since late November 2011* (for both the saved and the lost to read via your website), together with the content of these viewpoints, have led us to the following conclusion.

We, therefore, with deep sadness and heavy hearts, absent any appropriate repentance on your part, rescind the invitation to continue efforts towards reconciliation with you, directly or with the assistance of a mediation panel. There are only two possible outcomes, either (1) you meet with us in person and repent, or (2) you completely remove yourself from the HCC community and seek a church with elders under whose authority you are able to sit comfortably.

Absent repentance from you, on Thursday, March 22 we intend to inform the other members of HCC of this decision who, to our knowledge, are aware of your charges against us as elders. We will do so by sending them a copy of this letter and attachments. In order to not be accused of quoting extracts out of context, we have included the entirety of your postings, despite their length. Although we have not included the countless email exchanges between us (which at times were interspersed with the conversations that were not recorded), their exclusion is not an attempt to conceal them from those who might read this letter. On the contrary, they will be made available in their entirety upon request.

In conclusion, absent repentance from you, we will also make this letter available to anyone in the HCC community or in a leadership position in the broader Christian community who requests to know about the events leading to this decision.

This decision has not been taken lightly. Accordingly, it is with sorrow that we send it.

Michael Bradford David Chamberlain Todd Cravens Douglas Simpson Iain Whitfield



18 November 2011

Dear Steve,

It is deeply unfortunate that you viewed the invitation to last night's elder's meeting as an "excommunication trial" rather than one of the steps Jesus commands us to take along the road toward reconciliation, which was our intention for the meeting. It grieves our hearts that you assumed we had arrived at forgone conclusions concerning you, though, as God knows all hearts, we had not. We continue to desire a conversation with you face to face rather than in writing.

Nonetheless, in the absence of that meeting, we offer the following:

- Your demand that all further communication regarding this matter be done via email is clearly unbiblical given that Jesus commands such encounters take place in person (Matthew 18:15).
- Your assertion that Michael Bradford is unfit to be an elder cannot be heard since 1 Timothy 5:19 clearly states that such charges can only be admitted on the basis of two or three witnesses.
- Similarly, based upon the same verse, your insinuations that the whole elder team has proved to be a corrupting influence upon Michael cannot be seriously considered since you are the only person who has thus far made such a claim.
- The tone of voice and the manner in which you spoke last night raise questions regarding your adherence to the biblical exhortations in respect to relationships with overseers (1 Thessalonians 5:12; Hebrew 13:17).
- Your justification of your harsh and unkind "style of rhetoric" as being akin to that of Jesus and Paul ignores the clear teaching of Scripture that the Lord's servants are to "be kind to everyone" (2 Timothy 2:24), while offering reasoned responses "with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:16). Kindness, gentleness, and respect do not characterize your "rhetoric."
- The spirit with which you spoke last night (and resident within the document from which you read) was the exact opposite of the spirit which should characterize all that the children of God do. Paul instructs God's people to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3).

We entered last night's discussion with an open view as to whether the temporary deferment of your teaching authority could be lifted, subject to our listening to what you had

to say and presuming a subsequent dialog. In light of your remarks and your contempt and distrust for us as elders, particularly regarding our inability (according to your standards) to rightly handle the word of truth, we cannot permit you to continue to teach at HCC under our overseeing authority as elders. Furthermore we believe that your teaching role as a small group leader within HCC should be similarly withdrawn.

Steve, while it may be hard for you to receive, we continue to operate in a framework of love towards you and with an expectation that our unity in Christ may yet be maintained. It is still our hope that we would be able to enter into a discussion with you in person that would result in your being able to stay as an active member of our community. Absent that, we presume that, in light of your views of our leadership, it might prove difficult and unedifying for you to remain.

In prayerful hope that we might be able to continue in fellowship together,

The elders

## HCC XNOTE

As you may know, Michael and Todd had asked me to co-lead the Adult Sunday School Class. After I taught a couple of lessons and Michael had taught a few, Michael asked me to comment on a lesson he was preparing. So I sent him my comments on his lesson, which apparently he was not please with, to say the least. Michael had me meet with him in private to talk to me about it. I don't remember alot of the details and I don't a record of that conversation, which is why I prefer to dialogue over email. As I recall I tried to explain to him what I meant, but he made it all about the tone. And then the accusations started to fly. Next thing I know I get a call from Todd telling me that the elders have decided to remove me from teaching until this issue with Michael is resolved. And to this day they still haven't provided me with any justifiable reason for having done so. The elders then proceeded with an excommunication trial. Todd calls me up and tells me that Michael gave his testimony, to the elders of which I was not priviledged to and that now I was to show up at the elders meeting where they will be prepared to hear my testimony. I went there, read my testimony concerning my viewpoint of the associated events, and I left them copies of the document I read so that there would be no miscommunication. And in the testimony I included not only this issue concerning the comment I made to Michael, but also with regards to their having removed me from teaching without a justifiable explanation and all the implications of that. Fact is I not only have no regrets of what I had written, looking back on it, what I had written was good, and I would do it again.

But the way that not only Michael but the whole elder board has handled this matter, how they have treated me in the process and what the actual comment was all about tells me that there is a serious problem among the elders which has huge implications concerning the direction they may be taking HCC.

### Pr 26:

- 21 As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.
- 22 The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts.
- 23 Like a coating of glaze over earthenware are fervent lips with an evil heart.
- 24 A malicious man disguises himself with his lips, but in his heart he harbors deceit.
- 25 Though his speech is charming, do not believe him, for seven abominations fill his heart.
- 26 His malice may be concealed by deception, but his wickedness will be exposed in the assembly.
- 27 If a man digs a pit, he will fall into it; if a man rolls a stone, it will roll back on him.
- 28 A lying tongue hates those it hurts, and a flattering mouth works ruin.

Iain's Sermon entitled, "**It's Time to Clear the Temple**"

Check ambiguity

Said Lord himself should cleanse the temple

Alluded to Reformers

But don't recall exactly what he was proposing being the basis for HCC beliefs.

Iain adds to the text by pretending to be an eyewitness to the event.

Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days.

16:00 Application

"Temple" today:

You Christians together collectively are the temple - the "church".

It is possible to destroy the church - God will destroy that person.

Follow Jesus, not men.

Iain contradicts himself saying we are not to cleanse the temple but let the Lord to do that. Then he says we are to cleanse the temple.

Quote from Iain's Sermon:

*"He does not need us to do it. But there are times and many times when he turns to those to us in the church and says to us "Get this out of here. This has no place here. This must go because that's not what the church is all about. **So I invite you elders you leaders go and spend some time asking Jesus how he's cleansing even this local expression of this church.**" And for those of you in the back remind you that when Paul wrote to the Corinthian church he was writing to those who were following Apollos*

*and Paul, so this is for every member ...And it's for Jesus to tell you what needs to go in this particular community."*

This is what Jesus is in the processing of cleansing from the temple as I see it - getting rid of the mishandling of the Word of God in treating all interpretations of the Bible with equal weight. And secondly cleansing the leadership of conceit, deceit and malice.

**Mr 14:63** The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked.

**Pr 17:13** If a man pays back evil for good, evil will never leave his house.

**Gal 1:10** Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.

### **Diotrephes**

#### **3John**

9 I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us.

10 So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.

11 Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who characteristically does what is good is from God. Anyone who characteristically does what is evil has not seen God.

12 Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone— and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true.

## **An Insight Concerning the Elder Board at HCC**

This insight had been developed inductively. That is, a bunch of things happened, some seemingly unconnected. But like pieces of a puzzle they all fit together and formed a big picture. That picture is as follows.

This is what I'm speculating has been happening with regards to the elder based upon the evidence I've been privy to. Over the years Satan has tried to gain influence at HCC through the elder board. But since its inception God has been placing men of wisdom and fortitude who have kept HCC on track. Formerly I perceive those men were Ray and Andy. Ray's gone. But I find it interesting that just prior to Andy retiring the elder board chose the most unlikely candidate, Michael Bradford, to join the elders. And they themselves at the time expressed surprise as did myself and Michael. Michael was a good friend of mine, a Berean like myself, scrutinizing everything in light of the Bible, and being open to scrutiny. He esteemed the Word of God and handled it accurately and boldly. However, he has sort of a hyper-critical nature, which is fine from my point of view, but consequently he would frequently confront the elders concerning just about everything that bothered him, which one of the elders told me they found rather annoying. Yet that's the man they chose.

What I think had happened was that as God was preparing Andy to leave the elder board for his next mission, He sent Michael in his place. From that standpoint Michael was the perfect candidate to essentially oversee the elders given Michael's attributes, and consequently this was one way God may have intended to keep HCC on track.

But though some mechanism, perhaps the **1Tim 3:6** effect in coordination with Satan's influence on the other elders, Michael became proud, perhaps along with the one or more elders and not open to scrutiny. And one of the great dangers of conceit is you don't know you have it. Consequently with no one overseeing the overseers, Satan starting his plan to bring HCC down the path towards the heresy of Unitarianism.

Just a note about Todd, the teaching elder. Good guy. And I think he eventually could become another man God uses as an overseer of the elders, but right now I perceive he doesn't have the fortitude and the insight to handle the job. As it his job performance as the teaching elder has been mediocre from my standpoint (though I generally have a lot higher standards than others in such matters), but he has great potential. However, even so, a strength that I perceive Todd does have is keeping deviations within limits, but not as a Berean, but rather with a denominational mentality. I can foresee that it's possible Satan can get him to give up such restrictions and allow HCC to go down the path towards Unitarianism.

I think what happened next, almost exactly a year after Michael had been an elder, is God called Michael and Todd to ask me to teach Sunday School, in order to set up a scenario where God would use me to try to correct the problem they had, of which they were not even aware. (It's just amazing to see God's sovereignty in action in all these things).

What happened was that shortly after teaching a few lessons I noticed Michael was treating different interpretations to be of the same weight which did not deserve to be treated with equal weight. And this is important to understand. Different interpretations of verses should not be treated as if they were all equally valid if in fact there is sufficient evidence from the text itself that leads to one being a more convincing interpretation than the other. Beware of teachers who simply mention varieties of interpretations but treat them all with equal weight. If it is the policy of the elders to treat the Bible in this manner, it has huge ramifications concerning the future of HCC.

Consider the following chart of different ways people handle interpretations of the Bible.

	Interpretation Method	Teaching Method
<b>Pro-Scrutinizing</b>		
<b>Berean</b>	Comprehensive Inductive Bible Study	Teach others to develop their own personal convictions based upon Inductive Bible Study
<b>Anti-Scrutinizing</b>		
Denominational	Read into the Bible one's denominational doctrines	Indoctrinate with one's denominational dogma
<b>HCC?</b>	View all interpretations as equally valid <u>within limits</u>	Share everyone's viewpoint without giving weight to any one
Unitarian	View all interpretations as equally valid <u>without limits</u>	Anything goes

First, while the Berean method is open to scrutiny, other methods are not. In particular note the possible path HCC may be taking. Notice that the only difference between HCC and a Unitarian church, if this were the case, is merely a matter of where the limits are set. But over time if the limits expand, there will be little to distinguish HCC from a Unitarian church

To understand what Unitarianism is, here is the official statement at [uua.org](http://uua.org) - Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations:

### **Beliefs and Principles in Unitarian Universalism**

Welcome to Unitarian Universalism, **a religion that celebrates diversity of belief** and is guided by seven principles. Our congregations are places where we gather to nurture our spirits and put our faith into action through social justice work in our communities and the wider world.

That's where HCC may end up if it continues on its present course as I see it.

Continuing with the ongoing saga, the next thing to happen was Michael asked me to comment on his lesson he had prepared, and I was brutally honest as usual. But in particular I was critical of his handing of different interpretations as if they had the same weight. Now understand that Michael and I had a history together.

I knew Michael for about 10 years I had already been attending HCC for a couple of years when Michael first came. We attended a Men's Bible study together for a few years and we recognized the same zeal for one another for the Word of God.

We became good friends and clicked like David and Jonathan together battling the particular giants we came across. For example, in 2008 together we confronted the elders of HCC with regards to a Biblical matter we thought they may have been compromising on. And in fact one of the elders later told me personally that he changed his position on that matter due to our influence. Though another elder at that meeting suggested that Michael leave the church altogether.

For us the Word took precedent, even in our relationship. We were frank and brutally honest with one another. We were Bereans. We scrutinized everything in light of the Bible and we put aside our egos to allow ourselves to be scrutinized. As iron sharpens iron, we were men, and as such we didn't have to worry about offending one another's egos.

Now in 2010 Michael was asked to become an elder. I reminded him and warned him that Paul wrote in **1Tim 3:6 not to assign a novice as an elder lest he become conceited**. And I felt that Michael was too much of a novice for the role. But as he was a man of the Word and so I wasn't too much concerned about that. Now in the process of the elders evaluating him as a candidate he preached a sermon and afterwards asked me to scrutinize it. And as usual I was brutally honest. After criticizing his content I added this:

*You have historically not been the kind of person who would gullibly follow the misconceptions, misleading and false teachings of the religious elite, but one who seriously scrutinizes such ideas in light of the Word of God to accurately represent the meaning and its application and to communicate it clearly. Has something changed? Has this opportunity to become an elder already corrupted the purity of your doctrine? If that is the case, I don't presume you're conscious of it.*

For I was indeed alarmed for my old friend that the temptations that come along with this potential role of elder were already starting to take their toll and that this once zealous man for the Word would be corrupted and this friendship lost.

But in fact he reacted well to the criticism. He corrected and clarified himself and in fact made no mention at all of me having offended in any way. It didn't damage his ego. He didn't view it as an attack on his integrity and character. Because that had been our relationship. That's the man I knew and respected. That's the man who showed himself to be my brother. This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at the Word of God.

Now a year later, after he had been an elder for a year, he and also the teaching elder at HCC asked me to help out teaching the Adult Sunday School. This being just after the summer where I first had the privilege of teaching in an official capacity a Sunday School class at HCC on prayer. So Michael and I teamed up teaching 1John. I thought it was going to be like old times.

However after I had taught just two lessons and after Michael had taught a number, Michael ask me to critique the materials he was about to utilize in his next lesson. And as usual I was brutally honest. In particular he was treating two interpretations with equal weight which were not deserving of equal weight. And it is this paragraph that got me removed from teaching at HCC indefinitely.

*But perhaps you feel that's your role as an elder - to mishandle the Word of God so as to accomodate the diversity of beliefs in HCC, keeping people in the dark so that they have no basis for taking a stand on one (interpretation) or the other, and thus any basis for disagreement concerning the interpretation of 1John you portary as being simply one's subjective opinion. I cannot in good conscience mishandle the Word of God in that manner, and thus you may want to review whether or not I qualify to be a Sunday School teacher at HCC.*

And what I had perceived was further validated later on in a class he taught where again he treated different interpretations of equal weight which were not deserving of being reckoned of equal weight. It's an understatement to say that his reaction to that was, shall we say, not what I would have expected from my old friend. First he met with me and accused me of sinning in what I said. Then he went to the elders, initiated an excommunication hearing, testified against me, and subsequently the elders expelled me from teaching at HCC. And then the elders called upon me to give my point of view.

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## Strategy

Because of the overblown reaction both of Michael and of the board of elders, I knew something was seriously wrong with those guys. So in my testimony - which is essentially an exhortation - I had to deal with three issues.

1. Something is seriously wrong with Michael which needs fixing
2. Something is seriously wrong with the elders which needs fixing
3. This potential theological trend towards a Unitarian type of heresy must be stopped.

My strategy with Michael was basically to get him to remember the way he was and to help him perceive the same change in himself that I noticed in him after having been an elder for a year, and in particular with regards to his present conceitedness. And my main scriptural backing is 1Tim 3:6 which itself may be convincing enough to get the job done. I'm relying on the principles of 1John, that if Michael is born of God, he's not going to be able to continue in sin given the correction I'm giving him. It's just a matter of time till he gets restored. And when he is restored, he end up being much stronger for it, having realized how susceptible he had been to temptations of office and he'll also be aware of other things I've alerted the whole elder board to, which he can keep an eye on.

My strategy with the elders was first to point out their rash and inappropriate decision in having me expelled from teaching and the implications of they had done, which actually gave me a huge advantage in my testimony, insomuch as I could then take the moral high ground, they themselves being in the wrong for how they handled this matter so far. And then I went on to show them that not only had I not done anything wrong in what I said to Michael, but in fact that is apparently the very thing the elders need to hear as a warning against this theological trend into heresy which they themselves had either overlooked or themselves were affirming.

So that's how I won a hearing with regards to speaking on the third problem. And having exposed the potential heresy, and now that the elders have been made aware of it, it's going to be more difficult for that trend to continue.

All that in a 20 minute talk.

The following is the testimony I gave:

11/17/2011

## **The HCC Excommunication Trial of Steve Amato**

### **Steve Amato's Testimony**

Todd had called me up and informed me that Michael had given his testimony to the elders concerning these recent events, (though I don't know what he told you), and that I was now to show up at this meeting in which the elders were prepared to listen to my viewpoint. And so it was after many sleepless nights and with much fasting and prayer I have prepared this testimony which I will now read. And as it is written that *he who answers before listening— that is his folly and his shame*, I suggest you fully hear me out without interruption, and then think carefully about what I shared and consider the implications before getting back to me with a response. And I'm led to say this because despite my service to this church over the last 12 years, and in spite of your role as overseers, most of you have barely spoken to me during that time, let alone listened to my viewpoint over the years, let alone taken the time to think about how I view things. And now that you sit in judgment over me to determine my fate here at HCC you could show the least amount of courteousness by listening to my viewpoint for which you have allegedly called me here, uninterrupted.

As I understand it, this meeting is part of the whole excommunication process which Michael Bradford has initiated base upon the passage he referenced to me in Matthew 18:15-17 even though I think he is well aware that there is no justification for taking such extreme measures. And I will provide evidence to support that.

But before I get to my testimony defending myself concerning this incident. I will share my point of view concerning your recent decision to have had me expelled from my teaching role at HCC, as I find it relevant to this whole matter. Todd had informed me that apparently you thought it the appropriate thing to do until this matter with Michael is resolved, whatever that might mean, which was certainly not a justifiable reason in my mind for removing me. Now maybe you're just unaware or

callous to the impression you have given, the message you're sending by doing that. What you have done is publically penalize me, treat me as guilty before hearing me out. That decision you made reeks of partiality, prejudice and rush to judgment, and gives the impression to me of an attitude of contempt and hostility which you all may have towards me, however you may dress it up with fine and disingenuous words. That's the message you sent and that's the message that was received. You showed no concern for my reputation. And so I hardly think I'm going to get a fair hearing from you in this trial where you sit in judgment over me. In fact I get the vague impression that your judgment against me is a foregone conclusion and that these proceedings are mere formalities to give the outward appearance of righteousness.

Furthermore by removing me as a teacher beforehand you callously subjected the body to potential unnecessary controversy whereby this whole matter could have become a debate in the public arena before I had even given my viewpoint. Which would not have been the case had I been allowed to continue teaching. For by removing me it begs the question of others as to why I had been removed. Perhaps it was your scheme to imply to them that I had done something so seriously wrong as to warrant my expulsion even before I had given my viewpoint, otherwise known as defamation of character. Whatever fallout comes from that decision of yours will be largely your own fault.

But given your historical concern for political fallout at HCC I'm under the impression that you knew that and went ahead with the decision anyhow. My impression being that the outcome of this trial had already been a foregone conclusion and if so you knew that such fallout was inevitable, so why not attempt to mar my reputation in the public arena so as to attempt to polarize the people of HCC against me, demonize me, to stir up the crowd against me so as to minimize the number of people who would subsequently leave the church or otherwise view you in a bad light and to prepare them for what you would do to me next. For maybe you thought, "If we leave him alone like this we will lose both our place and our institution". Or to dress it up with the style of rhetoric Iain used in his last sermon, perhaps you feel the Lord has called you to purge the temple of me.

But need I point out that the actions you took prejudging me hardly put you in a positive light, as it would seem to show partiality, prejudice and rash judgment on your part. And I just can't imagine how you're going to try to justify this rash decision of yours to the assembly. That's my impression and my point of view about that. Well, enough said about that for now. And now I ask you that I be uninterrupted for a few minutes while I present to you my defense.

As for his matter with Michael, if there were something of a systemic nature wrong with me of which the elders were aware being of such a degree as to be worthy of such a trial as this, surely over the 12 years I've been serving here it would have been grossly negligent on your part to have the audacity to view yourselves as overseers and yet fail to have dealt with it. Let alone invite me to be a Sunday School teacher to begin with. Surely that is not the case. Therefore I take this trial to be about this particular incident.

**But as for what I had written to Michael, he was treating two interpretations with equal weight which were not deserving of being reckoned of equal weight, and I think he knew that. And yes I speculated that perhaps he was doing so to accommodate the diversity of beliefs at HCC, and perhaps that was in accordance with the sentiments of the elders. But that is not something that I would be willing to do, that is, to mishandle the Word of God to accommodate the diversity of beliefs at HCC.** In particular this is the speculation I made in part of my email to him in response to his request to scrutinize his 1John lesson. This is the blurb from the email upon which this whole trial is based.

*But perhaps you feel that's your role as an elder - to mishandle the Word of God so as to accommodate the diversity of beliefs in HCC, keeping people in the dark so that they have no basis for taking a stand on one (interpretation) or the other, and thus any basis for disagreement concerning the interpretation of 1John you portray as being simply one's subjective opinion. I cannot in good conscience mishandle the Word of God in that manner, and thus you may want to review whether or not I qualify to be a Sunday School teacher at HCC.*

That's what this is all about. I simply made a rhetorical remark insinuating what he may or may not have felt concerning his role as an elder. And it is that insinuation that has led the elders to unjustifiably remove me from teaching at HCC and has led to this trial as to whether the elders will expel me from HCC altogether. The fact that Michael has blown this completely out of proportion speaks for itself in my opinion.

And, by the way, in this recent class where he taught on **1John 2:15-17**, which I was supposed to teach, he did much the same thing as I see it, in that he spoke of two different interpretations and fallaciously gave them equal weight. Whereas the text itself showed that not to be the case. And I perceived even Andy was trying to show him that the two interpretations were not of

equal weight. But again my impression was Michael has become indecisive, wanting to please everyone, and so appears to give every interpretation equal weight as not to offend anyone who might hold some bogus interpretation, but to treat their view equally with everyone else's. And perhaps that is the sentiment of the elders as well. This is not the Michael I once knew who used to esteem the Word of God.

Now it might be that you elders have decided that the policy of HCC with regards to handling the scriptures is to regard all interpretations of equal weight. But if that is the policy that is evolving here at HCC, just as the elder board itself is evolving, that has HUGE IMPLICATIONS concerning the future of HCC, and if this is the policy it should be made a matter of public record, so that those who abide in the Word can decide for themselves whether HCC is the kind of church they would recommend.

Interpretations are not to be treated with equal weight if they are not deserving of equal weight. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. And perhaps that time has come to HCC where to accommodate the diversity of beliefs here, the interpretation of the Bible is marginalized, and the Bible mishandled by treating all interpretations as if they had equal weight. Ray is gone; Andy's resigning. And this is where HCC is gravitating. Will there be anyone left here who has the integrity and the fortitude to handle the Word of God accurately?

As for the style of rhetoric I chose at times, there are scriptural examples of this kind both of Jesus and Paul, though Michael informed me in our meeting together that Jesus and Paul were special and not examples to follow in this regard. And he subsequently condemned my style of rhetoric as itself being sinful. And while that may be the sentiment of the elders as well, it's not the same man I knew years ago.

Now though I've been serving here over 12 years, most of you don't know me, having barely spoken to me during that time. Though I suspect the little you know of me you get from rumor and gossip, of which Michael has also told me is going on behind my back. But what you may not realize is the history of the relationship between Michael and myself. For we used to be good friends. I've known Michael since he's come here 10 years ago. In the past with regards to our zeal for the Word we clicked much my like David and Jonathan together battling the particular giants we came across. For example, you elders are all familiar with the incident in 2008 when together we confronted you elders with regards to a Biblical matter we thought you may have been compromising on.

Michael and I had a frank, honest, open relationship. We were Bereans. We scrutinized everything in light of the Bible. And it was iron sharpen iron. We were men, and as such we didn't have to worry about offending one another's egos. I've not changed my style of rhetoric over the years. Michael had been fine with it. Let give you evidence of that.

Just about a year ago Michael was made an elder. Just prior to that while he was in the evaluation phase he had asked me to critique a sermon he gave. And I was brutally honest as usual. And I have the email record of our conversation. In my critique then, which was about a year ago, I used the same style of rhetoric as I have recently and as I typically do among those I reckon take the Word of God as seriously as I do.

Michael himself admits he has been aware of my style. This is nothing new to him. He had always been open to a frank and honest evaluation. There were things in his sermon I took issue with, and I also included the same kind of rhetoric then as I do now. Here is an example, this was just a year ago. After criticizing his content I added this:

*You have historically not been the kind of person who would gullibly follow the misconceptions, misleading and false teachings of the religious elite, but one who seriously scrutinizes such ideas in light of the Word of God to accurately represent the meaning and its application and to communicate it clearly. Has something changed? Has this opportunity to become an elder already corrupted the purity of your doctrine? If that is the case, I don't presume you're conscious of it.*

Now over a year ago it didn't bother him. It didn't damage his ego. He didn't view it as an attack on his integrity and character. Because that had been our relationship. He took it well at that time. In fact he didn't even mention it in his response at that time. That's the man I knew and respected. That's the man who showed himself to be my brother. This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at the Word of God. But it appears that the man I wrote to recently was not the same man I had known. He had grown an ego. He had become conceited.

And Todd also has been familiar with my style of rhetoric over the years. I've likewise been impressed with Todd in his reactions. If this style of rhetoric was an issue why was it that both Michael and Todd came to me and asked me whether I could help teach Sunday School class. If it was a problem seems it wasn't so serious as to exclude me from teaching, let alone have me expelled from Hope Christian Church altogether, which is what this meeting is about. As you know, Michael has historically had a reputation for being hyper-critical. I didn't have a problem with that. As I see it what has happened to my old friend is that he has developed a hyper-sensitive ego, the result of which can be seen in his overblown reaction to a remark I made. A remark of which had not been atypical of how I had spoken with him over the years.

Frankly I find it rather disingenuous for Michael to have reacted in such a way as he did. **As I see it what has changed is that Michael has been an elder for a year.** Now the apostle Paul warns in **1Tim 3:6** not to assign a novice as an elder lest he become conceited. It is sad to see, my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me. And my meeting with Michael just corroborated what I had suspected had happened to him.

There he told me that I characteristically sin and alluded to 1John, in which those who characteristically sin are said not to have been born of God. And thus he has categorically told me he does not view me as having been born of God. Which I find to be rather disingenuous considering he had requested me teach Sunday School. He has already judged me and now he's just trying to get you on board in order to eliminate me from HCC altogether. And he may very well have already succeeded in doing that. And perhaps his sentiments about me have been the sentiments of the elders all along. In fact maybe that's where he got those sentiments from to begin with.

Furthermore in our meeting he obsessed about wanting to be esteemed. Something which hadn't been characteristic of my old friend. And there are other such things in his general response that reeked of conceitedness which likewise had been uncharacteristic of him in the past. I bring this up because in my defense I want to say that the man I wrote to was apparently not the man I once knew. I find it interesting that after spending a year with you this is what Michael Bradford has become.

I have to apologize for misjudging Michael the elder in speaking to him as if he were the man I once knew. But apparently that man is gone. My old friend I held to a high standard as I do myself with regards to how the Word is to be handled. Now that I've seen my old friend is gone I will not speak to this man as I had my old friend. And I will not hold this man to the same standard as I did my old friend. Consequently if I remain here at HCC my relationship with this Michael will reflect the same kind of shallow relationship I've had with most of you other elders for the last 12 years, which seemed to have been just fine with you. And frankly if this is what becomes of those who get close to you, I'd rather not.

I am on trial here. I, the accused, was called here to give my perspective on the situation so that you could render judgment. I have given my defense. I'll leave you to discuss these matters. I'll give you a written transcript of my defense. But given what you've done so far, concerning your judgment, or any additional charges you want to make against me, or any further dialog concerning these matters, I insist it be in written form, like email, so as to eliminate any possible miscommunication, and to eliminate the plausible deniability factor inherent in such secret meetings whereby you could make false claims about what went on here, and I would have no documentation to invalidate your claims. I've been burned like that before, and I will not stand for it now.

And if I ever hear that you have made false claims about what I said here, or otherwise hear that you have misrepresented what I have stated here by, for example, taking what I said here out of context, I will inform the relevant parties of this testimony that I have provided you this day, so that they can see for themselves what I actually said in context. I will not respond to any questions at this time. Any questions or comments you have you will send to me. You will give me time to think about them. And then I will respond.

steve amato

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That was the testimony. But there's more to the story so far, I haven't shared everything, and more to come as this crisis is not over.

## The Ramifications of My Expulsion from Ministry at HCC

(Darin privy)

As I've said to many people on many occasions, the primary reason for my having attended HCC over the last 12 years is because HCC has afforded me the opportunity to minister here in accordance with the gifts and calling that God has had on my life. But now having been officially banned from doing any further ministry here, I will inevitably move on to another place. Or as Paul would say, "**now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions**" **Rom 15:23a**, I will inevitably find another place.

There are many at HCC who have listened to me and still do. In fact this actions by the elders I think many find absurd, but it corroborates the observations which I had shared with the elders in private. And now having publically banned me from teaching, this has become a public matter. Jesus said, "**If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town.**" **Mt 10:14** While I don't think that characterizes the concensus among those who attend HCC, it seems the elders have refused to accept what I have told them and have taken these extreme measures against me, driving me out of the church, it seems with regards to them in particular I shake off the dust of my feet. It appears to me that their own conceitedness, which apparently had its influence on my good friend and led him, likely with the influence of the other others to bring about this end severing our friendship and driving me out.

But that's just a red herring compared to a much larger issue which is think is being overlooked, perhaps intentionally so. When I tried to correct my old friend as I did, it seemed it touched upon a nerve and it wasn't simply just about his character, nor about what it may imply of the character of the elder board in their own reaction of removing me from teaching Sunday School before I had even spoken to them. (And in fact to this day, despite having asked them explicitly, they still have not provided a reason for having removed me from teaching Sunday School before I had even testified before them) Again, I don't think this is all simply a matter of how these actions reflect on their character.

There is a larger issue, which as HUGE RAMIFICATIONS for the future of HCC, though granted what has been revealed to me so far concerning the elder board itself has implications for the future. But the larger, looming issue concerns the content of the correction that I attempted to make of my old friend, now an elder had been teaching. The subject itself of which I found disturbing in his teachings may indicate that the trend at HCC is starting down the path to Unitarianism, and the elders may either be aware, not be alert, not exercising their role, or it may be that one or more of the elders who have a particular influence among the board are intentionally steering HCC down the wrong path.

## Irreconcilable Differences

### Turning the Tables

Seems Iain's sermon was prophetic in the reverse, the tables being turned on him. **Pr 26:27** **If a man digs a pit, he will fall into it; if a man rolls a stone, it will roll back on him.**

I am justified, indeed probably obligated, and I could argue I even have the elder's endorsement to take the following action, namely to expose this matter to a few key people who will then come approach the elders with me to correct them - bringing them through the excommunication process. (Let's show them how it's done!)

**"I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure."** **2Tim 4:6**

Who will stand with me, and who will desert me in my time of need?

The one I most trust is Lin San. Everyone else may potentially stab me in the back under duress.

Anyone who comes with me may end up being banned from ministering at HCC as well.

**"I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church. Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who**

does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God." **3John 1:9-11**

Problem: Once I turn the tables I go from victim to accuser.

**1Tim 5:19** Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.

Note the mishandling of this verse by the elders, again revealing not only their incompetence to handle the Word of God accurately, but also they do it for their gain.

Question: *Having removed me from teaching just for being under investigation, wouldn't it be a double-standard if all you also didn't likewise remove yourselves from teaching roles here at HCC seeing as you are now under investigation?*

They'll turn that down, but the double-standard will once again revealing their hypocrisy and partiality. It corroborates the fact that they portray an elitist attitude.

**Issue:** Should I surprise them with an additional witness or tell them beforehand.

#### **Elder's Retort:**

They may ask "is this satisfactory".

They are abusing scripture in order to condemn the innocent. For I am innocent of the charges made against me.

## **Banned!**

**Negotiations are ongoing.** Taking a break for Thanksgiving. The ball's in my court. I'll make the next move.

This whole thing is an overblown reaction by the elders to a criticism I made of them. Furthermore in light of how they have behaved through this process, while I have issues with how they have been handling scripture, what has been particularly disturbing to me is their conceited attitude in how they react to criticism and scrutiny leading to censoring me in the HCC community.

On 11/18/11, I received a written notice from the elders banning me from any teaching roles in HCC for the foreseeable future. They haven't yet provided me with a justifiable reason for their actions so far. But we're still discussing it. They've told me that if others were to ask, they're basically being told to stay out of it.

Tacitus characterized the persecution of Christians under Nero in having the burned to death in this manner, "*they were consumed not for the public good but on account of the fierceness of one man.*" Has the actions taken by the elders against me been for the public good, or simply a reaction of their own conceitedness?

Interesting that Tacitus also noted of Nero's persecution of the Christians as simply a red-herring, making them scape-goats to deflect attention away from him with regards to the burning of Rome. I wonder if the elders aren't doing a similar thing to me to deflect attention away from themselves.

## **My Response to the Elder's Censuring Me**

*If I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?*

### **Review**

To summarize the situation up to this point, I was co-leading the Sunday School class with my old friend Michael Bradford who had now been an elder for year. He asked me, over email, to comment on a lesson he was preparing. I had found something that was alarming to me in his lesson, something which was an on-going issue, and which could, if unchecked, have huge

ramifications for the future of HCC, such as indicating a potential trend which could lead HCC down to the path towards Unitarianism. What I wrote to him is a matter of record. Michael wrote me claiming that I had "*attacked his integrity and motives*" and demanded a private meeting in which he accused me of sin in the rhetoric I used not only in that email, but claimed that I have been characteristically sinning for years in the rhetoric I typically utilize. This despite the fact the he personally had invited me to teach Sunday School, and had a history with me in which I used the same style of rhetoric with him in the past - which is documented in past emails which I also brought up later at my trial. (*So why would he make it an issue if it now?*)

He then went to the rest of you elders (*minor point: not simply one or two, but rather all four*), who subsequently removed me from teaching Sunday School before I had even met with you regarding this matter. You then called me to a secret meeting to hear my viewpoint. To protect myself against the possibility that you may later claim that I said things which I didn't say there, I wrote down what I was to say, went there with the document, all I did was read it, gave you copies and left. (Your response to me later verified this kind of thing to be absolutely necessary). You then sent me an official notice banning me from ever teaching at HCC again, both regards to Sunday School and teaching in my small group, as long as you are elders there, which I find to be rather absurd.

You made six points as the basis for your decision to censure me. In response it is my assertion that you have not provided me with a valid reason both with regards to why you initially removed me from teaching Sunday School nor why now you have banned me entirely from teaching at HCC, including my small group.

### Response to Elder's Six Points

You made six assertions as forming the basis of your censuring me. The following are my responses to the six assertions you made against me. And of course they have to be taken in the context of the testimony I had read to you.

**#1** - What I had insisted on was documentation which would protect me from any false allegations on your part as to what you might claim went on with regards to a private meeting with you. Here's the actual quote in my testimony you are referring to. "*I insist it be in written form, like email, so as to eliminate any possible miscommunication, and to eliminate the plausible deniability factor inherent in such secret meetings whereby you could make false claims about what went on here, and I would have no documentation to invalidate your claims. I've been burned like that before, and I will not stand for it now.*"

To give evidence of the necessity of such, look at your assertion #4, which you use as one of the bases of banning me.

**#4** - "*The tone of voice and the manner in which you spoke last night raise questions regarding your adherence to the biblical exhortations in respect to relationships with overseers*"

All I did was simply read the document I had written, gave you copies, and left. And in fact I thought beforehand, having taken away from you the possibility that you could misrepresent what I said, seeing as what I said was all written down, I did indeed consider that you would possibly, grasping at straws, accuse me of something which I hadn't protected myself against, namely issues of "tone of voice" and manner. And so I was careful not to give you any cause to make any accusation along those lines. But you did. What you did in bringing my tone of voice and manners into play in this secret meeting of yours simply corroborates the content of my testimony and validates my insistence upon documentation. Now it appears that when I meet with you in secret I would have to bring a tape recorded and video equipment, along with written document which I would simply read, to protect myself against any false allegations you would bring up concerning tone of voice and manners, seeing that such is so significant to you as to warrant the censure you have placed on me.

**#2** - My allusion to **1Tim 3:6** with regards to Michael and the corroborating evidence I provided was intended as part of my defense, not as itself sufficient evidence to have him remove. But to answer your point, my testimony constitutes the first witness in this regards. Therefore if anyone in the future were to bring up assertions questioning Michael's eldership, you cannot ignore my testimony, for their assertion would constitute the second witness against him in this regard.

But I would like to point out the fact that even suggesting a connection between **1Tim 3:6** and Michael's overblown reaction to what I had written him, you use as a reason for banning me from teaching. Seems this is how the Christians at HCC can expect to be treated if they criticize an "elder" in person.

**#3** - You say that the insinuation (*and let us remember, it is not an allegation at this point*) I have made cannot be seriously considered. And yet apparently you consider the insinuation to be serious enough as to use it as a basis of censuring me.

**#5 and #6** - basically speak to the same issue, namely my style of rhetoric which is recorded in my written testimony. That style of rhetoric you again use a basis for censuring me. At the time, given Michael's overblown response to criticism and the overblown response of the elder board in their rash decision to have me removed from teaching, prior to banning me altogether from teaching, I perceived there may be a spirit of conceit among the elders which is driving their actions. Part of the reason why I chose the style of rhetoric I did was to validate or invalidate that suspicion to me. In my view, given your response, it's pretty much validated to me. Though I'm only making an insinuation, a reasonable insinuation given the data, in that regards, and not an accusation, not a positive assertion.

How did Jesus speak to the conceited religious elite of his day? What was the precedent He set? (for example **Mt 23**) Well there you go. And even when Paul confronted Peter, Paul characterize his rebuke of Peter is this way. (**Gal 2:11** **When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.**) And there are many other such examples. But in fact the rhetoric I used was rather tame compared to many precedents we find in scriptures in how the Lord and his servants speak to the conceited among the religious elite, both in the Old and New Testament. I don't think I have to present to you a comprehensive Bible study on the matter, you should know what I'm talking about.

My assertion is this, none of the points you have made constitute a justifiable reason for censuring me in my opinion.

## **Suggested Resolution**

By banning me from teaching you have made this a public matter. People have been asking me for an explanation, and I have little doubt that they have likewise been asking you. But barring a complete explanation of the matter, I have little doubt some may be coming to their own conclusions and acting on them already. Consequently very soon there must be some public resolution to this matter. At this point I would feel completely justified in making all these written materials that have accumulated and that constitute the body of evidence in this case, a matter of public record so they could judge for themselves.

But for the sake of the reputation of HCC and to preserved what reputation you'll have left when the dust settles, I suggest the best solution, which would appease me and the best solution to preserve your reputation and that of HCC is that you relent from your decision to having me banned, reinstated me as a Sunday School teacher, continuing on to teach the epistles of John along with Michael. As well as my teaching role with regards to my small group.

Your position on the matter would be that your banning me was simply a mistake, a rash decision on your part, an overreaction, which upon further reflection and discussion you decided had not been called for, that the matter was not so serious as to warrant such an action, and so have decided to relent on that decision. This would be a more conciliatory approach to bringing this matter to some closure.

I suggest all the elders individually seriously consider this, as this whole matter will come to bear on the reputations of each individual elder along with the elder board as a whole, and to consider the damage the elder board itself is doing to HCC in their mishandling of this matter. I'll await your response before taking actions of a less conciliatory nature to bring some closure to this matter.

steve amato

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## **Concessions**

Me: I don't prosecute them

Them:

- They stop prosecuting me
- They relent on their censure of me and reinstate me as a teacher

- They admit to making a rash decision

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1. Your demand that all further communication regarding this matter be done via email is clearly unbiblical given that Jesus commands such encounters take place in person (**Matthew 18:15**).
  2. Your assertion that Michael Bradford is unfit to be an elder cannot be heard since **1 Timothy 5:19** clearly states that such charges can only be admitted on the basis of two or three witnesses.
  3. Similarly, based upon the same verse, your insinuations that the whole elder team has proved to be a corrupting influence upon Michael cannot be seriously considered since you are the only person who has thus far made such a claim.
  4. The tone of voice and the manner in which you spoke last night raise questions regarding your adherence to the biblical exhortations in respect to relationships with overseers (**1 Thessalonians 5:12; Hebrew 13:17**).
  5. Your justification of your harsh and unkind "style of rhetoric" as being akin to that of Jesus and Paul ignores the clear teaching of Scripture that the Lord's servants are to "be kind to everyone" (**2 Timothy 2:24**), while offering reasoned responses "with gentleness and respect" (**1 Peter 3:16**). Kindness, gentleness, and respect do not characterize your "rhetoric."
  6. The spirit with which you spoke last night (and resident within the document from which you read) was the exact opposite of the spirit which should characterize all that the children of God do. Paul instructs God's people to "**walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.**" (**Ephesians 4:1--13**).

#### My Response:

Concerning your points **#4,#5,#6**, your response and your overblown reactions to a criticism of you have indeed convinced me that you elders are those I would characterize among the conceited religious elite so commonly found among your type of office throughout history.

How did Jesus speak to the conceited religious elite? (for example **Mt 23**) Well there you go. And even when Paul confronted Peter, Paul characterize his rebuke of Peter is this way. (**Gal 2:11** **When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.**) And there are many other such examples.

So if you get the impression I'm "disrespectful" and in your face, you now know why. I'm following the Biblical precedents for dealing both with the conceited religious elite and those among the religious elite who are sinning. Afterall, does Paul himself command concerning confronting elders who are sinning, "**Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning**" **1Tim 5:20**

Concerning **#3**, that is exactly what I did. Michael the elder was sinning and I rebuked him in the presence of the other elders so that you guys may fear. But in place of the fear of God, you all showed no fear of God. Instead you returned evil for good. And "**he who returns evil for good, Evil will not depart from his house.**" **Pr 17:13** and "**The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.**" **Pr 16:5** "**The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; Pride and arrogance and the evil way And the perverse mouth I hate.**" **Pr 8:13**

The evidence now convinces me that indeed the elder board is the reason for the change in Michael's character over the last year in which he has suddenly become conceited. But you show no concern for his welfare, but simply proper procedure in the delivery of that insight, because it speaks to your own conceitedness. And again concerning **#2** all you're concerned about is procedure. You don't take it to heart. You discard it out of hand. But you have corrupted a good friend of mine and have marginalize a man who used to hold the Word of God in high esteem, and I don't take that lightly. And I don't think God takes that lightly. So just get over your conceitedness and deal with it! Repent from your wicked ways. Change your attitude and behavior. Stop sinning and stop leading others

into sin.

"If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?" **John 18:23** Your response has given no justification for striking me by having me removed from teaching Sunday School to begin with, let alone striking me once again by banning me from teaching at all at HCC, including my small group.

And if you are so obstinate in your stand, we can just bring this process to a public forum, let all the evidence be laid out, and see how they react. How would you like that?

## Proper Procedure

You want to talk about procedure? Let's talk about procedure.

### **Mt 18:**

**15** If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.

**16** But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'

**17** If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

### **1Tim 5:**

**19** Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses.

**20** Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.

**21** I charge you before God and the Lord Jesus Christ and the elect angels that you observe these things without prejudice, doing nothing with partiality.

Elders are to be judged by the same standards as everyone else, as **1Tim 5:21** indicates. According to **Mt 18:15**, the first confrontation is to be between the two, that is, the one being the victim, and the other being the one who sinned. The elder board had sinned against me. I confronted them in accordance with **Mt 18:15**. Now in claiming special privilege whereby **Mt 18:15** applies to others, but not to them, they have in addition shown partiality in judgment, which is consistent with the evidence I had spoken of in my testimony.

And may I reiterate, up to this point, the elders have never given a justifiable reason for having removed me from teaching Sunday School in the first place, which was prior to me even giving my testimony. Yet I had made this abundantly clear in the content of my testimony. Yet, while they obsess over "tone" and procedure, I have receiving no response from them about the matter. They have avoided dealing with the actual substance of my testimony. What do you suppose that tells me?

*(Note: Public humiliation can be a power incentive for the conceited)*

**1Tim 5:19** is saying that Timothy need not consider an accusation against an elder without sufficient evidence, two witnesses being sufficient evidence. But the same holds true of everyone. Once the initial confrontation is made between the two, and corroborating evidence follow, as in this case, these constitutes two witnesses, as Jesus indicated that works bear witness, as do one's own words bear witness, as for example the response of the accused.

**John 5:36** "But I have a greater witness than John's; for the works which the Father has given Me to finish — — **the very works that I do — — bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me.**" And **Mt 23:30,31** "You say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets." These are examples of corroborating evidence as a form of witness, whether it be what one does or says.

And I now have the corroborating evidence both of your actions and your words which justifies me in bringing one or more additional witnesses to bear on this case. In fact by taking public action against me, banning me from teaching altogether, you have already made this a public matter. You have already censured me in your overblown reaction to my testimony.

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## My Charges Against the Elders

Abusing scripture in order to save face and condemned not simply an innocent man, but one who is trying to do them good, one who had serving effectively at HCC for 12 years.

They have returned evil for good. "**And he who returns evil for good, Evil will not depart from his house.**" **Pr 17:13**

Including refusing the procedure outlined in Mt 18:15-17 with regards to dealing with sin in the Christian community.

Showing partiality in judgment

Taking unjustified actions against me subjecting me to public defamation

Mishandling scripture with regards to how interpretations are handled

Appointing a novice to the role of elder

Note: Characteristically the religious elite view themselves in a special class above others, and not subject to the same rules.

They show partiality in judgement with regards to themselves being judged.

**Ga 5:26a** Let us not become conceited

**Rom 12:16** Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceite

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## My Objectives

- To stop a potential tend in its initial phase of development which could have brought HCC down the path to Unitarianism.
  - To purge conceitedness out of the elder board
  - To influence the elders to handle the Word properly and take it seriously, rather than playing "church" with it.
  - To show that sharp rebuke is appropriate and effective at times
- 

## Possible Outcomes

Cease Fire Arrangement

I could turn the tables and bring them through the whole excommunication process whereby this whole thing end up being judged among the assembly.

\* Force them to take this to the next level. Let them continue prosecuting me.

Nov 21,2011

To the Christian Life Menu

# The Shortcomings of Institutionalized Christianity

## What is the Church?

We can characterize the Church in one of two ways. Either it is an **institute** which exists independent of its members or it is a **corporate body** which is an ordered assembly of its individual members. These are two completely different concepts of "Church".

The word "Church" itself is "ekklesia" which means an assembly. And we see that "*(Christ) is the head of the body, the church*" **Colossians 1:18** and He suffered "*for the sake of his body, which is the church.*" **Col 1:24** Thus we see that the Biblical definition of "church" is a corporate body and not an institute. This is also opposed to those who call the Church "our Mother" in the sense of it being entity separate from the Christians who compose it. The Church is not "our Mother" in that sense. The Church is us collectively. **The institutional forms associated with the assembling of Christians together are neither individually nor collectively "the Church".**

In addition the body of Christ is supposed to be a living healthy body and not a sick or dead body. The difference between these is that a sick or dead body has non-functioning members. You could assemble a body together by assembling a bunch of dead non-functioning members together and end up with a dead body. But that is not the kind of assembly the Bible speaks of when referring to the Church. Notice the Biblical description of the church.

**Romans 12:4,5** Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

### **Ephesians 4:11-16**

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament,

grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Thus every individual member should not simply be present, but be functioning. And there should be growth in maturity. That is the objective, but institutionalism has to varying degrees obscured this perspective and hindered the accomplishing of this objective.

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## The Shortcomings of Institutionalize Christianity

Much of the shortcomings of institutionalized Christianity are simply due to the nature of institutions themselves. The same kind of shortcomings can be found in secular institutions.

### Institutionalize Christianity:

Tends to align itself against the significance of the ordinary individual Christian, while at the same time exalting an elite few. In fact there is the tendency to reckon "the Church" to be only the officers of the institutional church, or some mystical being called "Mother" from whom the officers are presumed endowed with authority.

Institutionalize Christianity tends also to view itself as the only legitimate form of Christianity. And tends to develop a divisive attitude even between institutions and tends towards exclusivism. This is just human nature at work as people form groups its natural to reckon your group, country, race, or whatever is particular to your group, to be superior to other groups.

As a result, any challenge to the superiority or criticism of the group is taken as a threat and dealt with often in a hostile manner. The degree of hostility is often a function of the degree to which the group has been institutionalize. Thus, Christ was callously murdered by the institutional leaders of his day; the Catholic church callously murdered protestants; Calvin and his people murdered anabaptists and menonites. It's the "lynch mob" effect. Atrocities are callously committed by groups whereas left to themselves the individuals of the groups would have never thought of carrying out such atrocities.

To quote John Calvin, "*Whoever shall now contend that it is unjust to put heretics and blasphemers to death will knowingly and willingly incur their very guilt.*"

Such an attitude was also present in the religious leaders of Jesus' day. But we see also another effect of institutionalism. Criticism of the institution or its leadership is of itself taken as heresy. And thus Jesus and those who walk as Jesus did were murdered, excommunicated, or shunned - depending on how institutionalize the organization is.

This implies also that Institutionalism:

- Inflates one's non-objectivity
- Inflates human dogma
- Inflates one's prejudices

The institutionalized Christian will tend to mindlessly accept whatever is the dogma of his particular institutional church. Indeed surveys have proven that the more institutionalize a Christian, the less he knows the Bible. In fact the hyper-institutionalized forms of Christianity will say that you as an individual Christian

cannot understand the Bible. Rather the correct interpretation has to be dictated to you by the institutional leaders. Well then why bother reading the Bible at all? That's the reason that they don't.

This ignorance of the Bible imposed indirectly upon the members by the institutional leaderships allows for the exaltation of human dogma, regulations, and indeed false teachings without any corrective mechanism in place. For example the Catholics don't seem to realize that the Bible doesn't make such a big deal about Mary. And by the way the Bible says, "*(Joseph) didn't know her sexually until she had brought forth her firstborn son.*" **Mat 1:25** Given the degree of Biblical ignorance of the more institutionalized, one could go on and on pointing out many things of which the less institutionalized are well aware. In less institutionalized forms of Christianity, an individual member could object with Bible in hand. But such a person would be reckoned a heretic and treated with hostility in the more institutionalized groups regardless of whether the objection was legitimate from a Biblical standpoint.

This is not to say that the more institutionalized reckon the Bible less relevant. No, rather **all forms of Christianity, and indeed all Christians, reckon their own version of Christianity to be the most Biblical, though most don't seriously study the Bible.**

Institutionalism tends towards reducing openness to self-evaluation. In institutionalism "self-evaluation" comes down to the leadership judging the ordinary members, but not the institutional leadership themselves being subject to judgment. Yet the Bible teaches, "*Beloved, don't believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.*" **1John 4:1** By "spirit" he is referring to those who teach and preach. The Lord commands the ordinary Christian to be skeptical about all teachings and to compare them to what the Bible says. Indeed Paul commended the Bereans who exercised skepticism towards his own teachings. "*Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.*" **Acts 17:11** It's less honorable to gullibly accept whatever is taught, even if such teachings happen to be correct. Even Jesus himself said, "*If I don't do the works of my Father, don't believe me.*" **John 10:37** He doesn't want gullible type of followers. Those he describes in the parable of the sower, "*those who are sown on the rocky places, who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with joy. They have no root in themselves, but are short-lived.*" **Mark 4:16,17** Thus we could say that institutionalism tends towards producing unrooted Christians - those who have a faith which is only on the surface. Not that they may not have a deeply rooted faith in the institution. But having a deeply rooted faith in Christ is quite a different thing.

## What is the emphasis of institutional teachings?

Institutions focus on

- forms rather than function
- outward appearance rather than inward nature
- letter rather than the spirit
- law or regulations rather than grace and purpose.
- human dogma rather than Biblical truth

Basically the same kind of characteristics Jesus pointed out of the institutional religious leaders of his day. (See also [The Synoptics on Hypocrisy](#))

The institutional mindset tends towards obsessing over issues of ritual, time, place, buildings and material

things. And even "going to church" becomes an end in itself rather than a means to an end.

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## The Origin of the Corrupting Effects of Institutionalism

Sinful human nature is of course the origin. But we must take care not to lay responsibility on institutional leadership alone.

### Corruption among the Leadership

Perhaps given their position leadership should take the bulk of the responsibility, as Jesus had the chief priests. But realize they are also in positions subjected to the greater temptations. Such positions could of course also tend to attract people who are already corrupt or prone to corruption. Power corrupts, but positions of power also attract people who are prone to being corrupted by it. Which is not meant as an accusation against any particular leader. Furthermore we see, particularly from democratic societies, that its generally the most popular who attain to leadership. But is popularity a good measure of a leader? Statistically positions of popularity attract people who want to be popular. Notice Jesus' accusation against the religious leaders, *"But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad, enlarge the fringes of their garments, and love the place of honor at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, the salutations in the marketplaces, and to be called 'Rabbi, Rabbi' by men."* **Matt 23:5-7** And so even today we see many religious leaders dressing in special clothes to distinguish themselves and demanding to be call "Father" or "Reverend" and such.

Money also corrupts as Paul writes, *"For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil."* **1Tim 6:10** Thus he avoided getting paid for ministry and advised the Ephesian elders also saying, *"I coveted no one's silver, or gold, or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities, and to those who were with me. In all things I gave you an example, that so laboring you ought to help the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"* **Acts 20:33-35** Professional Ministers have the right to get paid for ministry. But in 1Cor 9 Paul advocates freely giving up that right so as to minister more effectively. Financial dependency may cause one's ministry to be suspect and may consciously or unconsciously influence the minister to modify his ministry so as to optimize his earnings. This would make one's popularity an even greater factor. This can be seen most obviously when you observe how the minister handles doctrines which are true but unpopular. The temptation is to either advocate popular ideas contrary to the truth, or avoid talking on the subject or else speaking of it in such an obscure manner so as to say nothing.

Paul warned the institutional church leaders in Ephesus of the inevitable corruption which would occur among their own leadership just prior to his advising them concerning ministering free of charge saying, *"Men will arise from among your own selves, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them."* **Acts 20:30** He doesn't say that such men might arise from among the church leadership, but rather that it is inevitable that they will arise. This has proven to be consistent throughout the history of the institutional Church.

Paul tried to restrict positions of institutional leadership to the most godly not because only they are the only ones qualified to make disciples. For the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations applies to all Christians. Rather Paul imposed restrictions on leadership positions so as to reduce the likeliness of corruption. Notice for example he says, *"He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and*

*fall under the same judgment as the devil."* **1Tim 3:6** Why may he become conceited? Because it is just human nature that such positions invoke pride, and only those experience in humility can hope to avoid such influences. Seminaries can even exacerbate the problem. What comes out can often be worse than what goes in. What comes out is often a person who has been trained to have an elitist clergy/laity mentality, and as such reckons himself automatically qualified for leadership over people who have worked for a living. After all, if you're really committed to Christ you'd become a full time minister getting paid by those undercommitted Christians working at secular jobs. That's the attitude I've gotten from a number who have gone through seminary. In fact this trend has been so disturbing that whoever asks me advice about going to seminary I tell them not to go. Seminaries themselves can often cause one to lose their objectivity in studying the Word of God. Whether by choice or unconsciously, human dogma can replace Biblical truth. One seminarian spoke of his teacher being flexible on the interpretation of whether women should be in positions of church leadership over men, leaving it up to the students to develop their own convictions. It turns out the teacher was a woman teaching men. And what is being taught by that fact? The leavenous philosophy of Feminism permeates modern Christianity just as it does the society in general. Just as Isaiah said, "*Youths oppress my people, women rule over them.*" **Is 3:12** And since it is popular, Church leadership opposing it is more the exception than the rule. And so also for many other popular philosophies. But what of Catholicism in its opposition to women in the priesthood. Well they already made Mary practically into a goddess, carrying around Rosary beads, praying to her over and over. Talk about reckoning women to be in authority over men! And just as we see political correctness operating in the society, so we see political correctness as at work in the church, even though it may be over different issues. Young Earth Creationism for example is mindlessly advocated by much of the Christian community disregarding any alternative interpretation of Genesis and turning a blind eye to (actually not even bother to investigate) legitimate scientific claims to the contrary. Such blind irrational faith is simply a product of institutionalism and is contrary to Biblical faith. Politics is an institutional matter. Church politics can take priority over Biblical truth.

The typical loss of objectivity due to the elitist attitude and emphasis on institutional dogma can make a professional minister much less objective in Bible study than the ordinary layman. Here are some questions to consider in evaluating your minister: What percentage of his preaching are quotes from the Bible? And percentage are quotes from other theologians, philosophers and such? Does he have a tendency to use the Bible as simply a springboard to say whatever he wishes by allegorizing passages to death, making them say whatever he wants them to say? Is his preaching application-oriented? If it's application-oriented is it legalistic? And how does he respond to correction? (If indeed he even allows any feedback at all) For there are natural tendencies due to the corrupting influences and the natural selection processes of institutionalism.

Concerning even popular theologians of the past like John Calvin and Augustine, if they were to express their writings in simple laymen's terms, they're not particularly good in doing Bible study. At times they bring in unnecessary and I would say even unbiblical philological presumptions resulting in bizarre ideas. And yet if you were to oppose them on such flimsy points, you'd be reckoned a heretic and perhaps even put to death. There's an institutional philosophy, which is often applied either consciously or unconsciously, that since by God's sovereignty whoever is the leader must have been God's choice and therefore whatever they decide, whatever they say, must be from God. Thus human dogma and tradition replaces Biblical truth. I've run into such an attitude a number of times in different churches even in the evangelical community. I've seen Institutional church leaders even become hostile against para-church organizations. They're insecure because para-church organizations have generally proven more effective in carrying out God's work.

## **Corruption Among the Laymen**

Laymen among the congregation are not above reproach in exacerbating the corrupting effects of institutionalism. It's one thing to give due honor and respect to leadership. But it's another to play the tempter by provoking their sinful passions. What keeps the leadership's pride in check? Treat them like Chinese emperors and they'll behave like Chinese emperors. What source of humiliation have you provided them to help them keep their pride in check? But it is actually convenient for the laymen to reckon the leadership as super-Christians and themselves as nothing but stupid sheep incapable of doing nothing but the most menial tasks. Why? Because it frees up the laymen from responsibility. The laymen present themselves as immature Christians running around in diapers who only take but don't give. Then the leadership complains of how busy and burned out they are. Whose fault is that? I thought they were supposed to be super-Christians. The yoke would be easy and the burden light if Christians would simply grow up and start taking responsibility. But institutionalism hinders that objective.

*"To suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear."* **2 Timothy 4:3** Before Paul talked of deviant church leaders gathering disciples. But here it speaks of disciples gathering deviant teachers. Laymen are at fault when they seek to hear that which is contrary to what God has to tell them, which is not uncommon. What is popular is often unBiblical. But institutions will inevitably form around popular ideas regardless of their Biblical basis. And yet all will invoke "God's Sovereignty" saying that since their institution exists therefore it must be from God and therefore whatever doctrine they advocate must be from God. Furthermore leadership is often assigned by the congregation. When the church deviates from the Biblical whether in doctrine or practice the congregations cannot then wash their hands of blame, for they chose the leadership to begin with and they often fail to deal with such deviations when they first arise.

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## How Can We Fix the Problem?

The things I've pointed out are quite obvious especially to the less institutionalize and perhaps even to some in institutional leadership. This is nothing new. But what should be done about it? The most common response is to try to fix the institution, either internally or to get out of that institution and start another one. But realize that institutions due to their very nature will never be perfect in this life. Institutions just naturally have their own life cycle. They may generally start off well - Bible based and such. But inevitably they become corrupt. As members get sick of the corruption then there is either a revival within or a split. The split of the protestants from the Catholic church is such an example. And as the protestants institutionalize they also began to deviate from Biblical theology.

Should we not develop institutional forms of Christianity? That's not the solution either. *"Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another— and all the more as you see the Day approaching."*

**Heb 10:24,25** But is this being accomplished in your institutional church? Much of the Christian life involves getting together and interacting with other Christians. How else can you make disciples. It's just part of the way society operates that when you get a bunch of people together there needs to be some organization. With organization comes leadership, rules, regulations, definitions of what constitutes a member of that group, and what kind of behavior is expected of that member, and other such things. Before you know it you've formed an institution. I would say that institutions - whether they be institutional churches or para-church organizations - are inevitable. The apostle Paul established institutional churches all over the place.

What I propose is that Christians should be involved to a degree in institutional forms of Christianity, but not

reckon that doing so is all there is to the Christian life. Christians need to be aware and avoid the corrupting effects of institutionalism, while at the same time not avoid the institution itself. Jesus is a model. He went to synagogues and was involved in the ceremonies and such, though he and his followers were cast out of the synagogues from town to town. Christians should expect the same kind of abuse today from even institutional forms of Christianity. The history of the "Christian Church" proves this point. When a church becomes so corrupt as to reject any possibility of an internal change preventing you from fulfilling your ministry or role as a member of the body of Christ, then just as Paul shifted his focus to the Gentiles, perhaps it's time to find another church or start a new one.

**The institutional problem is inevitable and cannot be fixed.** It's simply a cross to bear. This is not to say that you should tolerate institutional corruption, but rather that you should walk as Jesus did. Live the Christian life, make disciples, do as the Lord commanded in spite of the institutional corruption. Point out the problems, the hypocrisy and such, just as Jesus did. And expect to be treated with hostility. That's just part of the Christian life. And if in the end the institutional elite manage to have you crucified, I say, **"CONGRATULATIONS!"**

Steve Amato

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