

## *The Safety Net*

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### *"The Season of Termination"*

Dear ones,

It's that time of year again.

I Chronicles 20:1, says: *"In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, Joab led out the army and ravaged the country of the Ammonites and came and besieged Rabbat."*

For thousands of years, kings have had a time to go out to war. It is not during the cold of winter, or the heat of the summer, but the emerging season of spring.

It may or may not look like spring where you live, but I can assure you it's not far away. And with spring, turmoil will come to far too many churches.

Churches *hire* in the fall, but *fire* in the spring.

Just as coaches get fired at the end of a season, preachers get fired in the springtime. That gives the church a few months to get a new one in place before school starts and programs resume in the fall. Whether the preacher finds a new place by then is of little concern.

Do you detect a note of cynicism here?

I keep it suppressed most of the time, but when the robins return and the daffodils sprout, the "preacher" in me turns memory back to painful times. I've been fired three times and forced out in two other places. My scars run rather deep.

I don't really want to write a cynical letter. I certainly prefer good news and encouragement to the alternatives.

Rather than being cynical, I'd like to give some instructions on "How to terminate your preacher." Or at least, "How not to. . ."

Now if you are the terminated, rather than the terminator, it might seem to make little difference — sort of like debating the most humane way to dispose of unwanted kittens or convicted murderers.

I'm not even going to question the right of church boards to tell the preacher to "hit the road." There are undoubtedly some preachers that should be dismissed or replaced.

I'll leave the "whys" up to individual consciences and the final accounting which elders are going to have to give to God.

But I would like to talk about the "hows." How to do it, and how not to.

This is not going to be a well thought-out, carefully researched, tell-all, end-all essay. This is going to be a hastily written, emotionally charged blog that is too near the surface to keep it suppressed. Like most of my letters. Remember I lost my highly talented editor three years and five months ago.

As the old song says, "The times, they are a'changin'." I think Adam and Eve were the first people to say that.

Terminations are not what they used to be; even in the world. A recent news story told about Radio Shack terminating 430 store employees and announcing it to them via e-mail. Sort of impersonal, wouldn't you say?

I remember the day in churches when the elders would call the preacher aside and say, "You've been here three years, and we appreciate all the good you have done. But we think we need to make a change." They would announce it to the congregation, give him a letter of recommendation, and give him as long as he needed to find a new place. When he found it, they would wish him "God-speed," hold a potluck in his honor; give him a plaque and a clock. In future years he was welcomed back on visits, and there would be an exchange annually of Christmas cards and other greetings.

Nowadays, the routine is different. The church that went to such great effort in hiring seems to take little effort in firing. When the man came, there was a broad-based search committee, lots of time, discussion, and prayer. When he is terminated, he is brought into an elder's meeting, and told that his tenure is ended. He is often not allowed to preach even one more sermon, with obvious fear that he might take vengeance and "split the church." (And of course, if the church does split, it is his fault, regardless.)

For whatever it's worth, let me make a few suggestions of what NOT to do in terminating a minister:

- **Don't break the law.** (Don't wrongfully get rid of the guy because he is too old, too fat, too dull, or too successful.)
- **Don't use Mafia tactics: intimidation, extortion, or murder.** Sounds bizarre, but these three are used often. For instance, "Don't talk to anyone in the church. We'll pay you severance if you don't talk to people, but if you do, we'll not pay you

another cent ." — Intimidation and Extortion. As for "murder," consider character assassination and heart attacks brought on by stress. Among the hundreds of terminated preachers I have tried to help in the last dozen years, almost all of them feel that they were not only fired, but EXCOMMUNICATED! That's the big change from earlier times.

- **Don't use libel or slander.** I know one preacher who was accused in the local newspaper of stealing the church's refrigerator, even though he had the sales receipt. Another was accused publicly of mail fraud; still another was accused of stealing from the church even though it was actually one of the elders who had done it, and several other preachers who were accused of sexual improprieties when none had occurred.
- **Don't titillate people's evil imaginations.** (One of the most frequent things I hear is that elders will terminate for no stated reason, then when people question their decision, they will say something like: "*We can't tell you our reasons. But if you knew what we know you would understand why we had to let him go.*" There is no defense against that evil statement.)
- **Don't send out letters or make pulpit announcements that may come back to haunt you in court.**
- **Don't terminate a man because of personal jealousies and power struggles and then try to "spiritualize" it by implying that the man was immoral or unscriptural.** If you don't like him, just say so!
- **Don't "fire" a guy and then try to "help him" by giving him the option of "resigning."** Word games have little place among Christian brothers.
- **Don't expect him to be able to get out and find a new job within the same time you might need in finding a new job in your profession.** Churches move very, very slowly.
- **Don't underestimate his pain or the pain of his family.** No matter how busy or pressured you are, your job is NOT like preaching. A preacher IS his job, and when he's terminated, it is unlike any other person's getting fired.

I could go on, but that's enough. My blood pressure is high enough for now.

On the PLUS side, what are some suggestions of things to DO in termination? Maybe it's enough to give just one. Ever hear of the Golden Rule? Something like, "Do unto others. . ."

I'll say again that I have no doubt that some preachers should be terminated. I'll also say again that I believe elders and churches have the right to terminate them. BUT, don't throw your Christianity out the window in the process. The scriptures give specific

instructions on how to deal with people “overtaken in fault.” (Matthew 18). Gentleness and love are always right.

Besides the specific guidelines on resolving differences in scripture, we also have examples of Christians who found it difficult to work together, and how they resolved it. Paul and Barnabas, for instance. Paul and Peter had their differences. Paul didn't want to give John Mark another chance but later had great confidence in him. These early brothers sometimes rode off in different directions in the sunset, but they never ceased to be brothers! A preacher recently said to me, “I have several enemies, people that hate me, and they are all elders!”

Having been an elder in two places, I certainly know the frustration that they can have with preachers. But, having preached for more than 50 years, I also know the difference between having elders who are *shepherds* and elders who are *bosses*. I've written earlier about those who are “*wolves in shepherds clothing*.”

Month in and month out I see the hurting preachers. I see the hurting elders. I see the hurting wives. I see the hurting children. I see the baffled congregations. I see the casualties of friendly fire. It is gut-wrenching!

I'll never forget the elder I called “Dave,” that I wrote about a dozen years ago. He told me that he had been personally responsible for firing five preachers. He thought he had done the right thing. But then his own son became a preacher and was fired in his work by a domineering elder just like Dave. I can still see and hear his sobs. He's never gotten over it.

So this spring, I'll enjoy the blossoms and warmer breezes. But I'll not enjoy the battles.

If these words help one group of church leaders to be compassionate and caring as they send their preacher on his way, it will be worth it all. And if it helps another group of church leaders to find reconciliation and decide to practice long-suffering rather than file for divorce, it will be worth even more.

Yours in Christ,

Silas Shotwell