

One month since *An Open Letter to the Elders of Bethlehem Baptist Church*

Dear friends at Bethlehem,

It's been one month since we started distributing our [open letter](#).¹ We've received a variety of responses from people at Bethlehem. Many had similar concerns about Bethlehem and appreciated our effort to put everything together. Some have come to us with more stories and more concerns. A few disagreed with the public nature of the letter or the need for an investigation. Altogether, we still believe that writing and sharing the letter was the right thing to do. We continue to pray for Bethlehem to respond in the right way by opening herself to an independent investigation (or evaluation/assessment, the specific term is irrelevant) into what has happened so that we can learn from all the griefs, healing can happen, and trust can be restored. Several people have asked us, "How did the elders respond to your letter?" We're writing this update to answer that question and to share some actions from the elders that have sharpened our concerns.

How has Bethlehem leadership responded to our letter?

The short answer is that the downtown elders have shown no indication (in our minds) that they are interested in addressing the concerns raised in the letter. The elders have had a version of our letter since 9/26. We started distributing it to others on 11/3. We have not received a formal response from Bethlehem about our letter. In all honesty, we're not hoping for a response to *us*, but rather a response to the *congregation*, openly acknowledging the problems, bringing things into the light, and seeking to take steps to correct wrongs.

We have received three personal emails from downtown elders. One of them was a negative email criticizing us (elaborated on below) and the other two raised various concerns and objections about the public nature of our letter. The emails did not point out errors in our letter and were more concerned with the ethics of our actions. The emails did not convey that there was any interest (from those elders at least) in seeking an independent investigation or addressing the concerns raised in our letter.

There have also been two public meetings downtown where our letter came up during Q&A time:

¹ Since the release of our letter on 11/3, we have been informed of four inaccuracies: 1) Ryan Griffith was dismissed from BCS. He did not resign. 2) Janice Perez Evans is misnamed as Janice Evans. 3) We state that there was no time given for Q&A at the Sept. 19 QSM. This is incomplete. Time was given for specific questions while discussing deacons, but time was not given for "other business," which is when general questions or congregational motions are brought up. 4) We state that photos of Ming-Jinn were left out of a "CityJoy" video. This is possibly misleading. The video featured CityJoy initiatives, but the video was not produced by CityJoy (a partner ministry), but rather produced by Bethlehem. That was what we intended to communicate but we didn't properly understand the relationship between CityJoy and Bethlehem.

1. 11/6 Q&A for Pastor Kenny Stokes' nomination for Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Downtown
2. 11/14 Special Meeting to vote on Pastor Kenny's nomination.

At both meetings, someone asked a question about how the elders were planning to respond to the concerns raised in our letter, and there were some follow-up questions on related issues. In his responses, Pastor Kenny avoided directly addressing the concerns but instead turned to criticize the letter in general and us as the letter-writers in particular. Pastor Kenny wasn't speaking on behalf of all the elders, but since he was speaking as the nominated Pastor of Preaching and Vision DT (effectively the Lead Pastor DT), we're assuming that his view reflected the general posture of the DT elders.

Some things Pastor Kenny said or implied about our letter and our concerns at those meetings:²

1. The congregation has already voted "no" to a third party investigation, so the elders should not now go against this vote. (11/6 and 11/14)
2. There were already three sufficient investigations by the journalists who wrote the three articles in Christianity Today, Star Tribune, and World Magazine. (11/6)
3. By going public, we were doing the equivalent of suing fellow believers in the court of law, "the very thing Paul says not to do," and with no biblical justification. (11/6)
4. The letter lays out a false narrative with a mixture of facts, half-truths, and falsehoods. (11/6)
5. The letter inappropriately takes up the cause of others who have been hurt. (11/6)
6. The main issue is the need for reconciliation between the three pastors who left and the 40 elders remaining. (11/6, 11/14)
7. The letter unhelpfully goes to social media which promotes "division, mistrust, and rage." (11/14)
8. The letter is making an "ungospel" demand that the elders confess all their sins before there can be any reconciliation and is like the prosecutors of the Salem Witch Trials, who "valued repentance over truth." (11/14)
9. The proper way the congregation should hold the elders accountable is by trusting that Jesus will hold the elders accountable, and be like Jesus, "entrusting himself to him who judges justly." (11/14) [more detail about this below]

We don't believe these responses sufficiently address the concerns we raise. They do not seem to acknowledge that any of the concerns are legitimate, nor do they recognize the need for serious reflection and evaluation. These responses make us think that the elders don't plan to address the concerns raised in the letter. We don't think a point by point response to each of his claims is necessary. However, we do want to address a few things specifically.

First, Pastor Kenny (along with other elders at different times) has said that the congregation voted "no" to a third party at the July 25 QSM as if that were a significant point

² Recordings with relevant timestamps available by request

against having an investigation. Yet, at multiple points during the discussion of the motion on 7/25, the elders said that they were already committed to getting help through an assessment or an evaluation of some sort, and that they had a list of six different organizations that they may reach out to. For example, while the vote for the motion was being counted, Pastor Ken Currie said, “I frankly believe that the vote ‘yes’ or ‘no’ [on the motion for a third party] does not define where we’re going,” and that the elders were committed to doing what was good for the congregation. This says to us that there should be room to plead for a third party investigation, regardless of the vote results. It thus seems disingenuous to state “the congregation already voted ‘no’ on an investigation” as if that settled the issue, when the congregation had been led to believe at that meeting that the elders would likely do an investigation (or evaluation/assessment) anyway, whatever the vote.

Second, to claim that the main task was reconciling with the three pastors who left feels like blame-shifting. It seems to say, “we wanted to talk over some issues with the three pastors, but they left before we could, so we can’t do anything now.” We understand there may be strained (perhaps even broken) relationships between the three who left and the forty elders remaining at Bethlehem. Yet, we believe it is a stretch to claim that these strained relationships are the primary problem that is underneath the half-truths, impression management, and the collection of people who have been hurt at Bethlehem. It seems more probable that there are underlying issues that led to these three pastors resigning. An investigation could help us figure this out. Do the remaining elders have *no* responsibility for the breakdown in trust with the congregation or any of the people who have been hurt over the years? If the elders do have some responsibility, let’s own it and move forward together, rather than blaming the people who left as if their absence hamstrings any possibility of healing or truth-telling.

Two examples of Misuse of Spiritual Authority

Pastor Kenny’s response on 11/14

At the 11/14 Special Meeting for Pastor Kenny’s nomination, a member asked a question to Pastor Kenny about our letter.

Question (paraphrased): I’ve heard people say, “If you love the church, drop the issues” specifically in regard to the open letter. Is that how you feel? If you love the church, you should drop the issues and move on?

Pastor Kenny (direct quote): *No, I don’t think that’s really what I’m saying. I was wanting to say real conflicts are real. Real hurts are real, and the hard thing about a compilation of offenses that are very much skewed to one side of the story over a period of 5-10 years is they’re each a particular story. That’s where it really gets messy, and you hear, “Well, why won’t the elders talk about it?” Because you ought to throw us out if we start talking about personal things about this person or that person. It’s a very awkward place to be. The place for us to talk about those issues is with those people. You know, “Why did you say that you got disciplined...” I’m going too far... “Why did you say you got disciplined for that when it was really that? Why did you put*

that out there on social media?” That’s a clarification we’re not going to have at a meeting like this. And there’s like a bunch of those. We’re just not going to have that.

That’s where, the undermining of authority as a culture, you don’t have to look very far on this, it’s all over the culture, hurts fathers, hurts schoolteachers, police precincts in South Minneapolis, and elders. And again this distrust, disdain of authority and leadership is epidemic. It’s all across the country in every sector. And it’s in the church. That ought to be in consideration when we think about “how ought a congregation respond to leaders?” The Bible says stuff about that. And “how ought a congregation think about holding elders accountable?” “They rule over you as men who must give an account.” Jesus says “I’m going to hold you guys accountable.” The same is true with personal offenses, like Jesus “entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” I could say more about that.

Our thoughts: While valid, the first part of his answer (the elders aren’t addressing personal issues in public), missed the reason why we included the personal stories (people are getting hurt!). The second part of his answer, discussing the undermining of authority as a culture, was extremely problematic.

1) It implicitly links the open letter with an effort to “undermine authority” in culture, as if those who are raising questions are attacking the elders. It then links this attack with other ideas under attack (fathers, schoolteachers, and police precincts in South Minneapolis). This analogy equates our attempt to raise concerns with broader cultural movements that are (perhaps inappropriately) undermining authority structures. This analogy is not only inaccurate, but harmful. Asking questions and seeking answers to root causes isn’t the same as undermining authority. Raising concerns about a problem shouldn’t be labeled as an attack. When a pastor responds to questions by casting the questions as an attack, it misdirects sympathy, care, and concern away from the actual people who have been harmed towards the people with power.

2) Far more concerning, Pastor Kenny states that the way the congregation ought to hold their elders accountable is by trusting Jesus to hold the elders accountable. This is a serious red flag. Pastor Kenny pushes back against congregational accountability by arguing the elders are accountable to God and implying that people raising concerns are not trusting in God. Since he is speaking as a lead pastor to the congregation, this is a serious misuse of spiritual authority and Scripture in a seeming attempt to silence concerns. Rather than using his power and authority to listen well, lean in, consider who may have been hurt and how, and how he might appropriately care for those people, he criticizes the people raising concerns for (in his mind) not following the Bible and not trusting in God.

3) Is “trust that Jesus will take care of holding your elders accountable” ever the primary posture that the Bible takes when addressing church issues? Paul’s harshest words are directed against Peter and other church leaders in Galatians. Paul publicly calls out the church leaders in Corinth for their serious problems. It is true that Jesus will hold them (and everyone) to account on the last day. That’s a sobering thought. Yet, the fact that Jesus will hold elders accountable is not a reason to stay silent about concerns in the church.

Pastor Ken Currie's Response to Our Letter

We also want to share a response to our letter that we received from Pastor Ken Currie on November 10th. We received this email with no prior interaction regarding our letter, and it is reproduced in full below. While we were initially hesitant at the idea of sharing a personal email, we are choosing to share it because we believe it is a concrete example of misusing spiritual authority (elaborated below). For what it's worth, we emailed Pastor Ken in early December to express that the email seemed quite concerning to us and ask if he still stood by it. He said he did.

From: Ken Currie
Date: Wed, Nov 10, 2021 at 10:51 AM
Subject: Connecting on your recent actions
To: Mickey Sheu, Hannah Sheu

Dear Mickey and Hannah,

Grace and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

I wanted to reach out to you because I want to have integrity with you and the Lord should folks ask me to comment on your letter and subsequent actions. As of yet, I haven't had anyone specifically approach me for guidance or shepherding but if they do it seems right to me that you know what my response will be.

I have no personal animosity towards you. Although we don't know each other deeply, I have always had affection towards you. I can say before our Lord that I truly wish good for you. Nothing you have done changes that in my heart.

To state it plainly, I believe you have and are acting unbiblically because you are insisting on your own way. It is certainly your right to believe that the elders should enlist an independent third party to conduct an investigation and judge the elders. As Christians we do not exercise mind control. We accept each other's testimony of faith and wide diversity of perspectives. We commend our consciences to each other (2 Cor. 4:2) and trust God with how others receive our positions. This is not what you have done.

You have insisted that the elders and the church see it your way and you have done so couching your actions in love. Your disregard for the decision of your brothers and sisters in the church having already considered this matter displays the opposite of love. To be clear, I believe you mean what you say. I believe you intend to be loving and are motivated by what you believe to be love. However, you are violating the simple, straightforward description of love in 1 Cor 13:4,

"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful."

I maintain no illusion that you will agree or are open to being persuaded with what I share. Again, I simply want you to know how I will be responding if/when someone in our flock asks for shepherding from me in how to understand your appeal to them to join you in your position.

I am more than willing to follow up with you in any format as time allows (meeting face to face, phone, email correspondence). I have no personal need to do so and will continue to pray for your hearts and minds to change in accordance with the testimony of Scripture.

In Him,

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Ken Currie

Pastor for Strategic Implementation
Bethlehem Baptist Church

The more we read the email, the more concerns we had, but we'll stick to two points:

1. Misuse of Scripture - His email claims that we are "insisting on our own way" (against 1 Cor. 13:4) and not commending our consciences to each other (against 2 Cor. 4:2). This seems like a misuse of Scripture and a misreading of what we are able to do. We do not believe that seeking to persuade others is "insisting on our own way" or refusing to "commend our consciences to one another." We don't have any authority to bring in a third party. We have simply raised our concerns in a public way in the hopes that others might share them (which many do) and jointly seek to persuade the elders to bring in a third party.
2. Misuse of spiritual authority - This email is the first time Pastor Ken communicated with us regarding the letter (he's had it since late September). He could have used his position and power to lean in, listen, and ask what would have moved us to take such a serious step. That would have built a bridge. Instead, he comes with a charge of sin, misusing Bible verses and his weight as a lead pastor, in what feels like an attempt to silence us. He doesn't say anything explicitly threatening, but this email felt like a shot across the bow. Even now, as we talked about the prospect of writing this update, his email weighed heavily in our minds. We got the message.

What now?

We're not sure. We are heart-broken that it feels like Bethlehem downtown is moving on without addressing the many hurts and seeming half-truths. We are discouraged that rather than building a bridge by acknowledging any legitimate concerns or areas where they've fallen short and seeking to set those right (even if they don't think an investigation is warranted), the

elders have instead criticized us and our letter. We are deeply concerned that downtown elders have used their spiritual authority and Scripture in a seeming attempt to silence questions rather than to listen and weigh the concerns. We would love for the downtown elders to strive to *rebuild* trust with people by working honestly to address those concerns and put things right.

We're thinking through what faithfulness looks like given the relative lack of bridge-building from the leadership downtown. Hannah is still a member at Bethlehem. We're still co-leading a small group and on two Barnabas teams. We've been hosting prayer meetings for Bethlehem at our home. We'd love to be part of a solution. Yet, we are not sure how we can be part of a solution if the elders either cannot see or refuse to admit there is a problem. We continue to plead with others and the elders to get outside help. Above all, we pray that Bethlehem would become a place of health, healing, and wholeness. Dark days are never a barrier to God's grace. Let's not pretend that all is well when it is not. The season of Advent (my favorite season of the church calendar) is a time of preparation and longing for the coming of Jesus. Jesus is our hope through all and in all. O Come, O Come, Immanuel.

Mickey and Hannah Sheu