

1 TIMOTHY 5:17-25

INTRODUCTION

Chapter five so far has been a very practical chapter. We have learnt how to treat the various groupings within the church (1 Timothy 5:1-2); we have discovered how the church should treat widows who are in need as well as how to use older widows in the work of the church (vs. 3-16). We want to finish this chapter by looking again at eldership in the church, but this time we are not going to look at their qualifications or functions for we did that in chapter three but keep to the theme of this chapter and look at how the elders should be treated by the church.

The background to this is again the false teachers who were operating inside the church of Ephesus. Many of these false teachers as we have seen were elders within the church. Most of the trouble that the church was facing was due to ineffective and sometimes false leadership. So how was the church at Ephesus going to restore a biblical eldership? Paul gives them and us clear principles for how the church should treat their eldership.

1. HONOUR ELDERS (vs. 17-18)

The first problem we have to solve is to ask are there two different types of elders. Are there ruling elders and teaching elders? The Presbyterian church have understood verse 17 in this way, they will have a number of elders who will be seen as ruling elders but they will have a minister who is seen as a teaching elder. Many other churches within reformed circles also see this distinction.

However I don't think this is a correct way to understand this verse. It seems to me that all that is being said is that all elders direct the affairs of the church and all elders will preach and teach, but there will be some of the eldership who will be responsible for most of the preaching and teaching in the church, because they have been set aside by the eldership and the church to work full time for the church. I come to this conclusion because one of the qualifications for eldership is the ability to teach (3:2). If some elders were simply called to be rulers then the gift of teaching would not be necessary.

So having dealt with that issue look how elders are to be regarded by the church. They are to be honoured and in fact those who fulfil the task of elder well are worthy of double honour. But we need to ask what Paul means. The word "double" means twofold, the elders are to be honoured in two ways.

First of all he means that elders must be respected especially or particularly those who direct the affairs of the church well and are the main teachers and preachers within the church. It is likely that because at least some of the elders at Ephesus were teaching false doctrine and had been influential in leading people from the gospel, then the church had lost respect for all the elders. But Paul wants to redress the situation and tells the church that if you want to have a restored biblical eldership then obviously you have to choose the men with the right qualifications (chapter 3) but also you must show them respect. This is done by giving them your full support and co-operation, as well as submitting to their God given authority (Hebrews 13:17).

The second aspect of honouring elders is the whole area of remuneration. This is clear from verse 18 where Paul quotes two verses of Scripture. One from Deuteronomy 25:4 and the other one from Jesus himself in Luke 10:7. Both verses are basically saying the same thing. The Ox was used to tread down the grain some cruel owners muzzled the Ox to stop it from eating some of the grain as it carried out its work. God says don't do that for the Ox is entitled to benefit from the work it does.

The other reference refers to Jesus sending out the 72 into what we might call missionary work today. When they entered a town they were to stay in a house that they were invited into and they are to stay there until their task is complete. They are not to move from house to house for they are entitled to receive food and accommodation because the worker deserves his wages. Paul says a very similar thing in 1 Corinthians 9:14. "In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel."

Paul's point is clear here, if God is concerned for the Ox that it should be cared for and if Jesus made provision for his disciples to be cared for then in the same way should the church not care financially for its elders, especially for those who serve the church well (excellent) and have been set aside for preaching and teaching. Although we may not think about it like this, Paul's point is that the salary of the Pastor is an expression of the honour in which the church holds him.

2. PROTECT ELDERS (v 19)

Because there were false teachers among the eldership of the churches in Ephesus then it was important that those who remained true to God's word should be protected from anyone who takes advantage of the situation in order to get rid of an elder who they have not got on with for whatever reason. Paul states that unsubstantiated accusations must be rejected immediately. So if someone comes to a member in the church and says that the Pastor or elder is involved in some sin then you are simply to ignore it, turn a deaf ear to it, unless the accusation is supported by two or three witnesses.

The accusation may still turn out to be false but at least it is to be investigated and looked into. The need to have two or three witnesses was established within the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 19:15) but is also taken up in the New Testament and applied to discipline of sinning believers (Matthew 18:16). These guidelines are very important for the church for there have always been people and always will be people who are eager to falsely accuse a leader.

They may do so because they resent his calling, reject his teaching or resist biblical authority. They may simply be jealous that the lord is blessing his ministry. Of course false accusations are the work of Satan and men of God of all ages have had to face such things.

An Elder depends upon trust for him to carry out his ministry. That trust is based on the Elder's integrity, credibility and his consistent purity of life. If he can be successfully attacked at these points and discredited then his ministry will be destroyed. That's why it is important that the church knows how to deal with accusations, their Elders must be protected, and therefore no accusation is to be entertained by the church without real evidence of two or three witnesses.

That means that we must put out of our minds any unfounded accusations for it is so easy to store accusations in our minds even though we don't believe them and from time to time allow them to come into our minds with the question, 'could there have been any truth in that rumour.' To allow such thinking will ultimately destroy you as an individual and will bring into question the bond of trust between you and the Elder concerned.

3. DEAL WITH SINNING ELDERS (vs. 20-21)

What is the church to do when two or three witnesses do bring an accusation against an Elder and the case is clearly proven. Just as Elders are to be protected from false accusations so the church is to be protected from proven accusations. So how does the church go about dealing with sinning Elders.

a) **The Sinning Elder Must Be Given An Opportunity To Repent –** This is not clear from the NIV translation but the words "those who sin" should really read 'those who continue in sin.' In other

words it is only the elder who having had the accusation proved against him refuses to repent that this action must be taken. This obviously treats the sinning Elder to be dealt with like any other sinning member of the church (Matthew 18:15-20). However when there is not genuine repentance then how it is dealt with is different from the ordinary members of the church.

b) He Must Be Rebuked Publicly - He is to be brought before the church and rebuked. The word rebuked means 'to expose' 'to bring to the open' 'conviction,' 'to correct or to reprove.' His sin must be exposed and the church must rebuke him. This presumably will mean that such an elder will be removed from leadership and if there is still no repentance removed from the membership in accordance with the regulations of Matthew 18:15-20.

What is the point of such drastic action? So that others may take note and be warned. This is probably thinking about the other elders; they will be deterred from sinning for they know the shame that will follow if an accusation is proven against them. Such a public rebuking puts a healthy fear into others and is a clear deterrent from sinning.

This is so far from the common practices of churches today. Churches today try to cover up the shame of sinning Pastors and Elders because of the embarrassment it brings to the church. Often Pastors are simply paid off or are asked to resign without any reason being given to the church.

As a result speculation abounds within the church and of course the local community also gets wind of it and sees the church just like the world in covering up a man's sin. When the church acts like this the sinning Pastor can very often go to another church and start all over again without having to face up to his sin.

Of course to take such action against a sinning Elder is not an easy thing and it takes great courage. It is so easy to shirk back from our responsibility and to find an easier way out which is what many churches do. So Paul reminds Timothy in verse 21 that God the Father, the Lord Jesus is watching.

They are the ones that Timothy is to fear not the reactions of the church or of society in general. The mention of the Father, Son and the angels is simply to stress that all heaven is concerned with the purity of the church. The church that tolerates sinning elders in order to protect its reputation on earth will lose its reputation in heaven. Therefore because heaven is watching Timothy, he must avoid partiality and favouritism (v 21)

There will be Elders that other elders may have a soft spot for. Or there may be favourite Elders among the congregation, but none of this is to influence the decision to either investigate an accusation or to deal with the sinning elder if a case against him is proven. God is watching therefore we ought to fear him and not let our own feelings get in the way of taking the right action. Leadership is a two-edged sword. Those who serve faithfully are to be honoured and protected from false accusations. However those who continue to sin are to be rebuked publicly and removed from office. Therefore in order to avoid such a tragic situation of having to rebuke a sinning Elder care must be taken in appointing elders in the first place.

4. CAREFUL IN SELECTING ELDERS (vs. 22-25)

The best way to prevent such tragic things happening in the church is to select the right Elders in the first place. This means that we are not to be quick to appoint Elders without proper investigation and examination into their qualities and gifting. To lay hands on someone was to set them aside for the role of public ministry, but this must not be done hastily. A thorough investigation into the person's suitability must be made and only then must the person be laid aside for leadership and ministry.

Again if only the church had put this into practise then much heartache would have been avoided. You know the situation, a man is converted, it appears he has many gifts; he holds a good position in his company and is use to speaking in public. There is a real need in the church for leadership; this man naturally emerges as a likely Elder and so before long he is appointed as Elder of the church. However after awhile things go tragically wrong, as flaws in his character lead the man into sin. It all could have been avoided with careful; investigation and also careful exposure to public ministry.

The reason for this careful investigation into candidates for the Eldership is because those who appoint Elders are at least partly responsible for the sin of the erring Elder (v 22). A little more patience, a little more investigation would have soon showed up the weaknesses of the candidate and therefore the whole incident could have been prevented. In verses 24-25 Paul gives some guidelines about this examination of candidates.

Some people's sins are quite evident; you don't have to look too far to see how unsuitable for Eldership they are. However there are others whose sins are not evident at first. They manage very successfully to cover them up; this is why the church must look below the surface of candidates for eldership. When you look under the surface you might find hidden sins or weaknesses that would make them unsuitable for the role of Elder.

But just as examination of candidates for the Eldership is necessary in order to see if there are any sins or weaknesses that would deem them unsuitable, so their lives must be examined for good works. With some candidates it will soon be obvious that they are suitable to serve as Elders for their good deeds can be clearly seen. However there will be other men who perhaps because of personality their good deeds are not as evident, but when you look below the surface you see a life full of good deeds. Such men are also suitable for the Eldership.

Elders are God's gift to the church, which is why care must be taken in appointing the right ones. But we must also take care that we deal with sinning elders, while at the same time refusing to entertain a false accusation against him. Finally we must honour them by respecting them and by remunerating them appropriately.

AMEN