

HELP FOR ELDERS

by Ray C. Stedman

In this section from First Timothy 5 the Apostle Paul again turns to admonitions and instructions concerning the elders of a church. Many of you will never be elders, so you are already thinking, "This is not for me; it's boring stuff." But remember that, in these passages, the apostle is dealing with the divinely-given machinery for the proper functioning of a church.

As we have already seen in Chapter 3 of this letter, a church that is functioning as its Lord intends is a uniquely powerful body. Paul calls such a church, "the dwelling place of God and the pillar and bulwark of the truth." This is where you find God in any age; it is where God lives. A church is also the display base for and the defense of the truth in a confused and bewildered world; it is where the mistaken and illusive ideas of men are corrected. I am not talking about a building; I am talking about people -- it is people who are led by elders. So to give our attention to elders is an important matter.

To get a church operating as it ought to is more important than maintaining good schools, or electing strong officials to office, or building a sound economic base in this country; it is far more important than developing our natural resources or controlling crime. All of those things are very important; millions of dollars and many, many hours are devoted to them, yet with all my heart I say that they are less important than getting a church functioning the way it ought to.

History confirms that, if a church functions the way it ought, all of the things above will begin to occur. This nation is testimony to that fact among the nations of the world. Because a nucleus of godly men and women sought to walk righteously before God, all the things that we say make up the genuine American way of life -- as far as that has been in existence -- have followed.

So here are Paul's instructions to young Timothy about elders. Chapter 5, Verse 17:

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching; for the scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages. {1 Tim 5:17-18 RSV}

Paul is clearly referring to those whom he called *bishops* in Chapter 3 of this letter. There *bishops* means "overseers," "those in oversight." That is also what the elders were. The word *elder* refers to the man -- his maturity, his experience, etc.; the word *bishop* or *overseer* refers to his work. An elder is to exercise oversight, to be aware of what is happening in a congregation and be concerned about it.

It is unfortunate that the word *rule* is used here about an elder's work: "Let the elders who rule well..." That word implies that these men are bosses, that they are somehow in charge, that they are lords or governors in a congregation. But actually the word is, *leads*; it is the common word for *leadership*: "Let the elders who lead well be worthy of double honor."

One who leads is not necessarily a boss. He does not drive people, he leads them. He goes before and sets the pace and the direction; whether people follow or not depends entirely upon how much respect he has built in their eyes by his personal character, his abilities, and his gifts. An elder is a man who is able to command the respect of others and get them to follow him in the directions the Lord has set.

On reading this passage some people have felt that there are two classes of elders. Some churches divide them into ruling elders and teaching elders because Paul says, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." But this verse does not necessarily imply that there are two classes of elders. There is really only one class: All elders are to preach and teach. In fact, in

Verse 2 of Chapter 3 one of the qualifications listed for an elder is that he be "apt to teach." An elder is an apt teacher; that is how a pastor or an elder leads a congregation. The Scriptures set the direction of life, and unless an elder is preaching or teaching from the Scriptures, he is not doing any leading. That is what constitutes the work of an elder, so all elders are to preach and to teach.

But some labor in this. Some devote long hours to extensive preparation, and they teach often; they hardly have time left to earn a living in other ways. The apostle says that, "those who labor at preaching and teaching," who have the skills, the gifts and the abilities to do this, are to be given "double honor." Honor (respect) is to be given to all elders and pastors -- that is the first honor.

Remuneration is the second. They are to be paid. Their needs, their expenses, their salaries are to be paid in order to free them to do the work of preaching and teaching. People often ask where we get this business of paying preachers and teachers. Some people think because the Apostle Paul made tents as he traveled around, that preachers should never be paid. But here is the basis for pastors' salaries: if they are occupied fully in this work of preaching and teaching the Scriptures, so that people understand them, then they are to be given this double honor.

The apostle lists some Scriptural evidence in support of this. He goes back to the Law, to the book of Deuteronomy, and quotes what Moses said: "You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain," {cf, Deut 25:4}. That was a requirement in Israel. In those days, when the threshing of grain was done by oxen which walked around on the grain to thresh out the sheaves they were not permitted to be muzzled. The oxen were working, so they deserved to eat. Paul also quotes this verse in First Corinthians, saying in that connection, "Does God care for oxen? Is that why he said that?" "No," Paul says, "he wrote that for us," {1 Cor 9:9-10}.

(When Martin Luther quoted this verse, he asked the question, "Does God care for oxen?" "No, of course not," he said, "because oxen can't read." It was written for us, not for the oxen.)

That is a very important principle to remember in reading the Old Testament. All those regulations that were given to Israel concerning their diet, their work, their clothing, etc., were not given to them only, they were given for us. They are pictures of what God is teaching us. If you read the Old Testament with that in mind, you will have a whole new book before you.

The principle Paul is getting at is that those who labor deserve their wages. In fact, he quotes these words of Jesus, "The laborer deserves his wages," from Luke 10 {Luke 10:7 RSV}.

That is interesting. That means that either the Gospel of Luke was already in existence then and Paul quotes from it a word from the Lord and calls it Scripture, or it means that this was a word spoken by the Lord which was widely circulated orally at that time, and Paul refers to it as the Lord's own confirmation of this principle.

On the other hand, if a pastor or an elder is not teaching and feeding the flock, then it is wrong to support him; let him work for a living like everyone else. But if he is teaching and feeding the flock give him the time to do so; that is the idea. Here at Peninsula Bible Church, we pay the pastors because we set them aside for this work. But those who do preaching and teaching (all elders are to do that), and yet earn a living we call elders. We distinguish between pastors and elders in that sense. But if you understand that all elders are pastors, then you will get at the heart of what this passage is saying.

Paul now takes up the delicate matter of the discipline of elders when they misbehave. Verse 19:

Never admit any charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. {1 Tim 5:19-20 RSV}

Charges against elders must be supported by more than one person. That is because elders and pastors are in public view, and oftentimes they have to say unpleasant things to people. They do not have to say them unpleasantly, of course. Sometimes people strike back; they try to get even -- sometimes by slandering or

starting rumors.

Not long ago I received a call from a young pastor who had been summarily dismissed by his board of elders. Charges had been leveled against him by a member of the congregation, who, it turned out later, was actually his personal secretary. She was angry at him about something, and she typed a letter that had shattering implications of very serious charges against the pastor and presented this letter to the elders as though it were something the pastor had received. Later, she confessed that she had written this herself. The letter resulted in the elders calling the young man in, and, without any further confirmation, relieving him of his responsibilities. This was a crushing blow to him, but God used it in his life and enabled him to survive it. That is the kind of thing this verse is designed to eliminate. Do not entertain a charge against an elder unless it is supported by two or three witnesses.

When a charge is confirmed and the elder repents, no public action is necessary. But if he persists (that is the next word), then a public rebuke is required: "As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear."

Reference is here being made to what our Lord said in Matthew 18, that well-known passage on church discipline. Jesus himself said, "If your brother sins against you, go to him and tell him his fault, between you and him alone; and if he repents, you have gained your brother," {cf, Matt 18:15}. Nothing more need to be said, that settles it. That kind of thing ought to be going on in a congregation all the time. It does here. But, Jesus continued, "If he does not hear you, then take two or three more and go to him again and try to lay hold of his conscience with their help. If he does not hear them, then tell it to the church," {cf, Matt 18:16-17a}. That is a public rebuke -- a difficult but very important thing to do. A church that does not do that when it is required is bound to lose its witness; its effectiveness as a church peters away to nothing.

This would be a very delicate matter for a young man like Timothy to handle. Timothy is an apostolic representative. He is not an elder; he is not a pastor either, although in certain other passages in this letter he is addressed as though he were, and I am sure he did act in that capacity. But here he is acting as a substitute, a surrogate, for the Apostle Paul. We do not have surrogate apostles today because when the New Testament was written -- this very letter is a case in point -- they became no longer necessary. The Scriptures have taken the place of these apostolic representatives in the early church. Today any concerned individual who sees from the Scriptures that things are out of line is responsible to call these things to the attention of the leaders of the church, and press for action if need be. We have the Word of the Living God constantly judging the church and correcting us. This is why the Scriptures were given.

Because of Timothy's delicate position, Paul urges certain things upon him. These are excellent points to bear in mind if anybody is attempting to correct a congregation, or to stir the leadership of the church to action along certain lines.

First, there must be no partiality shown. Paul says:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without favor, doing nothing from partiality. {1 Tim 5:21 RSV}

It would have been very easy for Timothy to have shown partiality. He might well have had some close friends among the leaders of this church at Ephesus. He very likely did, because he was working with these men and he himself was a lonely young man. But he must not let that stand in the way of doing what was necessary if an elder got out of line. Timothy might well have felt intimidated by certain powerful personalities among the eldership at Ephesus; he might have been afraid to take them on. That can happen. Elders can be very strong-minded men. I know. I have to wrestle with them every week, as I have often described.

Timothy might well have felt inadequate, but notice whom the apostle summons to his aid, whom he says is watching: "in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels." God the Father is involved. He is at work in the congregation. He knows what is going on; nothing is hid from his eyes. Christ Jesus, Lord of the church, head of the body, is present also. Jesus can work from within. He can touch men's consciences; he can get at their hearts. And the elect angels are involved, these personages whom the book of Hebrews tells

us are as "ministering spirits sent forth to minister to those who shall be the heirs of salvation," {Heb 1:14 KJV}. I do not know exactly what these angels do, but it is very important and significant. Paul tells Timothy not to be intimidated. If it requires action, act -- patiently, lovingly, thoughtfully, carefully -- but act.

Then Paul gives Timothy a second admonition: choose men carefully, he says.

Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor participate in another man's sins; keep yourself pure. {1 Tim 5:22 RSV}

The laying on of hands was the recognition of a man by the other elders as being chosen of the Lord. We frequently do that here. It does not confer anything; rather, it indicates that such men are the ones whom God has chosen. Paul tells Timothy to be careful, to not do that hastily.

I am always amazed at how many churches elect wealthy men to their boards merely because they are wealthy. Nobody ever seems to ask what other qualifications these men might have. If they make money, if they are successful businessmen, it is widely regarded that *that* makes them eligible to be elders. But it does not. They may be the worst possible men to put into that office. That is why Paul says to be careful. Look for the qualifications that other Scriptures have told us to look for.

Further, Paul tells Timothy not to ignore sins and weaknesses he may find in men: "Do not participate in another man's sin but keep yourself pure." If you suggest a man for eldership, knowing that there is a weakness or a sin in his life that he is not dealing with, when he is made an elder you have participated in his sin; you have gone along with it.

Sometimes men are put into office without any special care being exercised. The apostle suggests that Timothy be very careful at this point. It is so easy to say, "He's such a nice guy. He's so effective in his business. I know he's a bit greedy and he wheels and deals all the time, but he probably won't do that here with us." Be careful, because you are becoming a participator in other men's sins.

A man said to me recently about an elder in another church: "He's a good man and he's almost honest." That does not qualify a man as an elder. An elder ought to be an honest man, not almost so.

The third admonition the apostle gives is a rather strange one. Verse 23:

No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments. {1 Tim 5:23 RSV}

This admonition seems to be out of place in this context. Paul suddenly shifts from talking about choosing elders to a personal word to Timothy. I myself thought so for quite awhile, but now I think I see what Paul is getting at. Paul's previous word to Timothy was, "keep yourself pure." Timothy wanted very much to do that. He was obviously a dedicated young man who would willingly set aside anything in his personal life in order that his ministry might be right.

In writing this, Paul very likely was reminded of something about Timothy that he felt needed correction. Timothy, evidently, was leaning too far toward total abstinence from wine. We know there was a lot of public drunkenness in Ephesus at that time. The reaction of almost all Christians to public drunkenness is, "I don't want anything to do with that."

There has sprung up in the church a widespread attitude that the Christian position about drinking should be one of total abstinence; that no Christian ought to drink at all. But that completely sets aside the record of the Scriptures that our Lord drank wine, and so did the apostles.

Paul is evidently warning Timothy about total abstinence, especially because it was affecting his health. Timothy had not taken a balanced position. Paul warns him, "For your health's sake, don't do this."

So Paul warns him against drinking the water! If you have traveled abroad in some countries where water is

not drinkable, you know what Timothy was going through. He was suffering from what has been called "the Gruts" (for lack of a more descriptive term), or the "Mexican Quickstep." Paul is warning him to use a little wine to prevent that.

Years ago I was speaking to missionaries in Costa Rica, and they were telling me about stomach problems they had been having. They said that a few months earlier Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse had come down from Philadelphia and they had told him about this. Dr. Barnhouse said, "The problem is that you missionaries don't believe your Bible. If you did you wouldn't have these troubles." Then he quoted this verse, "Stop drinking the water but use a little wine for your stomach's sake," and added, "If you would do what the apostle said to do you wouldn't have this problem." He was right -- that was the problem. Wine does prevent stomach upsets, dysentery, etc. Paul is suggesting to Timothy that he use wine to prevent this.

I have heard some very tortured exegeses of this passage. Years ago, in Texas, I heard a young man seek to expound this verse. He was reading from the King James Version, which says, "Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake." This preacher's incredible exegesis was that there were two kinds of liquid referred to here: there was wine (which was really grape juice), and there was what he called "longer water," which was liquor. According to him, the apostle's admonition is, "Stop drinking that 'longer water' (Drink no longer water), but use a little wine for your stomach's sake." That is the kind of trouble you get into when you work with the English text. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

This is best stated by E. F. Brown, in an excellent summary of what the text is saying:

The text shows that while total abstinence may be recommended as wise counsel, it is never to be enforced as a religious obligation.

The last point the apostle makes is that Timothy ought to observe men over a period of time:

The sins of some men are conspicuous, pointing to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also good deeds are conspicuous; and even when they are not, they cannot remain hidden. {1 Tim 5:24-25 RSV}

That is a wise word. God was at work in that congregation in Ephesus, Paul is saying, and he was bringing to light things that were hidden. That is what Jesus does. He said, "A time is coming when that which is done in secret shall be shouted from the housetops; that which is spoken in the closet shall be heralded in the streets." Everybody is going to know about it. God takes hidden sins and brings them to light. Many a man thinks he is hiding his sins but he is not. God is steadily working to bring those sins to public exposure. There are some men whose sins are conspicuous, and it is obvious they are heading for God's judgment. You would not elect them or appoint them to any office.

But they are not the only kind, the apostle says. Some men are skillful at hiding sin. They appear to be very dedicated, committed people, but there is rotten evil in their hearts all the time. If you get into the habit of electing people to office or appointing them into some responsible position without giving time to observe them you will get into trouble. "Time will tell," the world's proverb says. Let some time go by. God will bring it out. Get close to them. The closer you get the more obvious their evil will become.

But it works the other way too. Some men appear retiring and quiet, yet they may be very good men. Such men may make the very best elders. So do not rush men into leadership. If they have something good going on quietly in their lives, even when these are not conspicuous, Paul says, they cannot remain hidden. God will bring it all out if you get close to them. Abraham Lincoln's famous dictum, "You can fool all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time," is a wise word in choosing elders.

All this concerns how God's church functions, and it is very important that the church function as God intended it. I rejoice that in many places people are again taking very seriously what the Scriptures say about the church and church government; they are trying to correct the things that have crept in by tradition through the years.

May God help us to understand that when his church functions as it ought to, it is an awesome power to correct and heal the life of a whole area.

May he grant that we will be that kind of a church.

Prayer

Lord, we thank you for your concern for your church, for what you have envisioned it to be and for what you are ready to make it to be, as men and women are willing to obey you and walk in the power of your Spirit. Grant to us to live in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels that we, in this twentieth century hour, may be the kind of church you came into the world to produce. We ask in Jesus name, Amen.

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