

1 TIMOTHY 5:17-20

HONOURING THE ELDERS

“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 treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’ Do not admit a 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

It is not self-serving for me to teach Christian responsibility to honour elders who labour among us, preaching and teaching. There must be an unwritten rule that preachers are not supposed to speak about money; especially are they to be silent concerning support for their service to the people of God offered before the Lord. Nevertheless, the Word of God addresses this matter forthrightly; and if we will honour God we will understand what has been delivered by God.

At the outset, I need to say that I am not paid what I am worth—fortunately. I confess, I am an unworthy servant of Christ the Lord; I have only done what was my duty [cf. **LUKE 17:10**]. However, with the Apostle, I magnify my ministry [cf. **ROMANS 11:13**]. It was received by appointment from the Risen Saviour. I know that God Himself appointed me to serve as an elder; and since receiving His appointment, I have endeavoured with all the energy of Christ that works powerfully within me to fulfil this service to the praise of His glory [see **COLOSSIANS 1:29**].

I did not enter the service of Christ for what I might earn—I had a superior income potential when I pursued scientific endeavours. I entered Christ’s service because of the pressing weight of glory that accompanied the call of God—I was compelled to preach the message of Christ the Lord. I understand only too well and from experience the Apostle’s statement concerning the proclamation of the Word. Paul wrote, “If I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel” [**1 CORINTHIANS 9:16-18**].

I was miserable when I wasn’t digging into the Word; I was disconsolate when I was not proclaiming the message of Christ the Lord. The situation has not changed in the ensuing years. I have not sought wealth in my service before the Lord; I have laboured to speak the truth in love to a generation that is woefully ignorant of love. I have not sought to flatter anyone; I have struggled to present the message of Christ without prejudice. I can say with confidence that I have lived off the gifts of God’s people, generously supplied by the congregations I have served. Through His people, Christ has provided all that was necessary to ensure that I was not reduced to penury.

Therefore, whatever I may say concerning honouring those who serve you, you may be assured that I seek nothing for myself. Again, as the Apostle has stated so eloquently, I am not “speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me” [**PHILIPPIANS 4:11-13**]. I do seek Christ’s glory through the service I render to Him, just as “I seek the fruit that increases to your credit” [**PHILIPPIANS 4:17**].

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

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THOSE HONOURED — “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” [1 TIMOTHY 5:17]. In many respects, the churches of this day resemble the church in Ephesus; this is obvious from several notable views. In each church, there will be found elders who are worthy of commendation. By the same token, too frequently there are found elders deserving censure. Paul sets the standard for both commendation and censure in the text we are considering.

Because Paul takes up this theme at this point in the missive, the implication could be drawn that there was a foundational flaw in the structure of the eldership in this congregation. Perhaps some of the false teachers had managed to insinuate themselves into the eldership; or perhaps some of them had actually come from within the eldership. Paul had warned this particular eldership that such a thing was not only a possibility, but it was a likely scenario. “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them” [ACTS 20:29,30].

Earlier, Paul had established the standards for eldership; now he provides instruction concerning the compensation of elders and the issue of their accountability. According to the Apostle, “the elders who rule well” are to be commended; censure is reserved for “those who persist in sin.” Several truths flow quite naturally from the former designation, as they do from the latter. Consider the commendation of those who serve you. The clear teaching is that those whom the elders serve are responsible to give honour to the elders because of their service.

Take careful note of the Apostle’s language in the first verse of the text. Paul has written, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” [1 TIMOTHY 5:17]. Do not imagine, as some have done, that within the eldership are two classes of men—“ruling” elders and “teaching” elders. While all elders are to be capable of preaching and teaching, the implication is that some of them devoted themselves exclusively to this task. These particular elders who were committed to the task of public teaching and preaching were to be remunerated because of the requirement for extra time devoted to this task. As a body, the eldership was responsible to provide leadership. All of the elders were to be doctrinally strong, each was to be effective as a teacher and together the eldership was to provide steady guidance to the congregation; however, it was reasonable to expect that only some would devote themselves to preaching and teaching.

Paul’s language is deliberate; consequently, his wording will prove instructive when we review what he has written. For instance, it is “the elders who rule well” who are to be honoured. His statement informs me that the elders are to be observed by those they serve—their labours are to be noted. If they fulfil the ministry to which they are appointed, the people of God are responsible to honour them. An assessment of their labour is always being made. This is true in every congregation. If the congregation is committed to the Faith, they are assessing whether the elders are true to the teachings of the Word—whether they deliver the truth of God without compromise and whether they are walking according to the will of the Master. If the members of the assembly seek fulfilment of their own desires, wishing to avoid the offence of the cross, they are assessing whether the elders are accommodating the flesh. In this instance, they will seek affirmation of their desire for ease and they will assess whether the elders are liked in the community.

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I note, as well, that the elders are expected to rule. The word indicating that their labour includes ruling is more common in Paul's letters than you might imagine. The only time the word is translated "rule" is in our text. It would be a mistake to try to apply our concepts onto the Greek, however. Let's explore some other instances where the same word is employed by the Apostle.

Earlier in this same letter, Paul had stated that among the qualifications of an elder was that, an elder "must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church" [1 TIMOTHY 3:4, 5]. The word translated "manage" in these two verses is the identical word translated "rule" in our text. It is used of deacons as well [see 1 TIMOTHY 3:12].

When he wrote the Thessalonian Christians, the Apostle admonished these saints, "We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you" [1 THESSALONIANS 5:12]. The word "over" is the same word translated "rule" in our text.

Let me point to just a few other instances where Paul used this word to convey a concept. Writing Titus, Paul spoke of the responsibility of believers to give themselves to doing what is good. "The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works" [TITUS 3:8]. Again in this same letter, Paul wrote, "Let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful" [TITUS 3:14]. The word translated "devote" in these two verses is the very word we are studying in the text.

In the Letter to Roman Christians, Paul wrote, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness" [ROMANS 12:6-8]. Note the qualification listen in verse eight for "the one who leads." The word translated "leads" is the very word we are studying.

Some Bibles, attempting to capture the richness of the word, translate this passage: "whoever has authority should work hard"²; "if one is over others, with diligence"³; "if you are put in charge, you must be conscientious"⁴; and "he who gives aid and superintends, with zeal and singleness of mind."⁵ The picture that is presented, then, is not that of a tyrant or a king, but rather of one who has authority and who uses it judiciously. We see in this designation one who is conscientious about directing the affairs, first of his home and then of the congregation. The leader provides oversight to ensure that the assembly follows the Master in all that is revealed through His Word. This one is recognised as an authority; but he is not guilty of authoritarianism.

This point is important—those who lead must not be overbearing. Elsewhere, Paul has written, "An overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant." The word translated "arrogant" is translated "overbearing" in some newer translations. One who is overbearing displays arrogance; and arrogance has no place in the life of the man of God.

² **Good News Translation** (American Bible Society, New York, NY 1992)

³ **New American Bible** (The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC 2011)

⁴ **The New Jerusalem Bible** (Doubleday, New York, NY 1985)

⁵ **The Amplified Bible** (The Lockman Foundation, La Habra, CA 1987)

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The Word also instructs, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith... Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” [HEBREWS 13:7, 17].

What is obvious, and what needs to be stated in the face of prevailing attitudes displayed among so many evangelical churches today, is that the congregation of the Lord is not a democracy. Fifty percent plus one determines neither doctrine nor what messages are to be delivered from the pulpit. Boards are not authorised to direct the affairs of the congregation. Innovations such as church boards are unknown in the Word; they grow out of the imagination of wicked men, finding no support in the Word of God. No board is called by God in the Word of God. No board directs the affairs of a New Testament church. No board provides oversight for the congregation. No board reviews the messages of the pulpit. When such innovations are introduced, it is a deliberate challenge to the Lord God who appoints whom He wills to guide the assemblies.

By divine design the eldership of a congregation is to be self-regulating. This is not to suggest that the flock is helpless in the face of wicked elders. We will explore congregational response to deviation from orthodoxy and/or orthopraxy later in the message. It is sufficient to note that Paul admits receipt of charges arising from any quarter when he writes, “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses” [1 TIMOTHY 5:19]. The errant elder is still accountable to the congregation to which he is appointed by God.

If the church is a spiritual body, and it is, then should we not anticipate that the Spirit of God will hold wicked leaders accountable? I understand that many of us are eager for God to act on our timetable. However, we must not forget the Word of God given through Peter, “Do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” [2 PETER 3:8, 9].

Peter has also cautioned elders who may be inclined to wickedness, “I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock” [1 PETER 5:1-3].

God does reveal Himself as holy; and those who act without regard for His holiness must face His judgement. Just as God struck down Ananias and Sapphira [see ACTS 5:1-10], so he holds to account those who abuse the position to which He has appointed. If He shows mercy and delays judgement, it may be that our own wickedness testifies against us. I tremble whenever I think of the words of warning given in Scripture, “Our God is a consuming fire” [HEBREWS 12:29]. Surely, the elders must always bear in mind the warning the preceded this word. “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears” [HEBREWS 12:14-17].

THE BASIS FOR HONOUR — “The Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages’” [1 TIMOTHY 5:18]. The tree of truth grows from surprising seed. I am always intrigued whenever I read Paul’s justification for honouring elders—he appeals to the Law (not surprising); but his appeal is not to just any portion of the Law. Paul appeals specifically to that portion of the Law that speaks of the treatment of one’s draft animals. Citing a commandment concerning an ox found in Deuteronomy, Paul reminds readers, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain” [DEUTERONOMY 25:4]. Well, there you have it; treat your oxen well. What does this the treatment of draft animals have to do with elders? I’m glad you asked; we’ll get to the answer shortly.

This is not the only time Paul uses this particular argument. Writing the Corinthian Christians, the Apostle used the same argument, expanding it to ensure full understanding. Consequently, we will benefit by looking to what he wrote to that dysfunctional congregation, adding the insight to what we have in the text before us today. Paul was defending his own service. In 1 CORINTHIANS 9:1-7 he had challenged the Corinthians, “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

“This is my defense to those who would examine me. Do we not have the right to eat and drink? Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?

Then, to drive the point home, in 1 CORINTHIANS 9:8-12a he appealed to Scripture to substantiate his right to be supported by those whom he served. “Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? For it is written in the Law of Moses, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.’ Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?” The minister of Christ is your ox. He labours on your behalf; he seeks your welfare before the Lord.

In far too many instances, the churches are noted for praying concerning their pastors, “Lord, keep him humble; we’ll keep him poor.” Tragically, this attitude appears more common than some might imagine. If the Apostle’s words have any meaning, we can gauge the commitment of the congregation by the manner in which they honour the elders. If the elders are poorly supported or disregarded, then it must be said that the church has no respect for the gift of God.

Listen to what should be a familiar portion of the Word. “[The ascended Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” [EPHESIANS 4:11-14].

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Pastors and teachers—the elders, the overseers of the congregation—are ascension gifts divinely given specifically to ensure that the people of God will be equipped for the work of ministry and to ensure that they are built up. It is as though God showered these gifted men on the churches in celebration of the triumph of His Son. If the elders are treated with disdain, or if they are considered a nuisance that must be tolerated, the people are dishonouring God who gives such gifts. To despise Christ's ascension gifts is to despise the One who gives such gifts to the churches. Until the churches attain maturity, Christ will continue to give His gifted men to the churches.

How do churches despise Christ's ascension gifts? Whenever a pastor is treated as a hired person, the church treats him with contempt. Whenever a pastor is told, as I have been told, "We will tell you what to preach," he is treated with disdain. Whenever a congregation adopts an attitude that demands that they be made to feel good rather than heeding the sound teaching of the Word, that is a congregation that shows despite to the messenger of God. When a congregation exalts itself over the Word of God, insisting that they know better than God, they have no regard for either God or for His ascension gifts.

One writer notes the disgraceful evidence of this prevalent attitude when he relates a conversation with a fellow elder that took place at a Pastors' Conference. "In my travels to pastors' conferences I have sometimes heard [accounts of failure to support pastors]. At a conference that I will not name, a pastor told me that a couple of families took it on themselves to supply his family with eggs and milk. He was understandably heartened by their generosity—until he learned that the cost of the gifts was deducted from his salary!"⁶

I wonder whether those congregations that disdain Christ's ascension gifts and that despise those whom He appoints to holy service realise the peril in which they stand? Recall a terse warning delivered by the writer of the Letter to Hebrew Christians. "If we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" [**HEBREWS 10:26-31**].

To reject God's appointed servants, exalting oneself, is nothing less than a repeat of the foolhardy efforts at self-promotion perpetuated by Korah. Let me refresh your memories. "Korah the son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi, and Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men. And they rose up before Moses, with a number of the people of Israel, 250 chiefs of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men. They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, 'You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD'" [**NUMBERS 16:1-3**]?

⁶ R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell, **1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit, Preaching the Word** (Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL 2000) 131

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Perhaps you will remember how that worked out. “As soon as [Moses] had finished speaking ... the ground under [the rebels] split apart. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods. So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. And all Israel who were around them fled at their cry, for they said, ‘Lest the earth swallow us up!’ And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men offering the incense” [NUMBERS 16:31-35].

Because these men despised the servants of the Lord, God dealt with them severely. Underscore in your mind that contempt for God’s ascension gifts is tantamount to rebellion—it invites divine wrath. No one should be surprised that treating God’s gracious gifts—gifts arising from Christ’s triumph—as though they were worthless should invite a harsh response. God calls His people to honour Him through honouring those whom He has given.

The Master told a parable on one occasion that is germane to this matter of honour for His servants. The parable is recorded in each of the Synoptic Gospel. I invite you to consider the account that speaks of some wicked tenants as recorded in Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus said, “Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’ They said to him, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons’” [MATTHEW 21:33-41].

It is fascinating to realise that the chief priests and the elders of the people to whom Jesus delivered this parable recognised intuitively that those who treated the land owner’s servants and son with contempt were worthy of death. Yet, these same men were guilty of insolence and contumely toward God’s spokesmen [see MATTHEW 23:29-36].

Recall Paul’s teaching concerning the diversity of gifts that are entrusted to each believer. “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” [1 CORINTHIANS 12:7]. On the basis of the Apostle’s statement, we accept that each member of the congregation is not only gifted, but each one is a gift given for the benefit of all. How much more should we value those gifted men who God has given to direct the affairs of the congregation? The people of God are His gracious gift for the benefit of all; and the elders are a special gift—they are a category that is unique because they were given upon His ascension and in celebration of His triumph.

In our culture, honour is often equated with monetary gifts or with remuneration. However, you will note that in our text, Paul does not deal directly with money; he deals instead with the heart attitude that will result in financial support. Those who honour elders will not begrudge generosity in supporting the service rendered to the assembly. However, it is tragically common for churches to treat those whom God appoints as elders as though they were hirelings.

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EXPRESSING HONOUR — “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 treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’ Do not admit a 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 TIMOTHY 5:17-20].

One truth that arises from this instruction is that elders are not a monolithic body. The office of the elder should be honoured, but not all who occupy the office are to be honoured alike. Some deserve honour above that accorded others; some must be censured. What must not be allowed is favouritism. All of us will have favourites within the assembly. Some people are simply more approachable, we are comfortable approaching them and discussing the most sensitive topics. What we must not do is assume that some elders deserve no honour. If an elder is so debased, so unproductive, that he dishonours the office, he needs to be confronted and held to account. There are mechanisms provided for that eventuality. Before we consider that matter, we need to explore further the matter of how to express honour for the elders.

How shall we understand the concept of “double honour?” There is no question but that the word translated “honour,” (*timé*) can refer to money. The “price”—thirty pieces of silver—for which Jesus was sold, is the same word, *timé* [see MATTHEW 27:9]. When Judas tried to return that money, the chief priests would not accept it for the treasury after it was thrown into the Temple; it was “blood money” (*timé*) [MATTHEW 27:6]. The redeemed of the Lord “were bought with a price” (*timé*) [1 CORINTHIANS 6:20]. Those earliest saints who sold their lands or houses, brought the proceeds (*timé*) or what was sold [see ACTS 4:34]. The word translated “honour” does signify money, or at the least, that which is of worth or that which is valuable.

In time, the word came to mean “honour” or “reverence” because it signifies the value or a person. We know that ultimately, all honour belongs to God. Early in this letter, Paul penned this doxology, “To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen” [1 TIMOTHY 1:17]. God’s honour is central to the final charge he issues to Timothy, “I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen” [1 TIMOTHY 6:13-16].

Though all honour ultimately belongs to God, it remains that slaves are instructed to give “all honour” to their masters [see 1 TIMOTHY 6:1]. Believers are exhorted to be “honourable” vessels, useful to the Master and “ready for every good work” [see 2 TIMOTHY 2:20, 21]. Thus, it is apparent that the word speaks of esteem, respect and reverence.

Though Paul likely has in mind respect due to elders because of their office, because he has just been speaking of honouring those who are truly widows through providing financial support for them [see 1 TIMOTHY 5:3-16], and because of the citations from the Old Testament in verse eighteen, it should be apparent that he has in mind financial support—an honorarium—for the service the elder renders to the congregation.

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Let me summarise the Apostle's thinking as I understand it. Paul is saying that elders who provide godly oversight, especially as they labour at preaching and teaching, deserve respect because of the office; and they deserve financial support to free them so they may excel in their labours. The financial support is an expression of honour. I see the honour Paul expects as being witnessed in three primary areas. Certainly, material support is one of those areas.

How much financial support should a church provide for an elder? There is no provision of a formula for support. It seems reasonable to expect that a pastor would have sufficient support to free him from concern for paying his bills and to allow him to provide for his family. Perhaps a reasonable expectation would be that he receives support equal to the average income of primary wage earners represented in the congregation. He should not receive excessively more than that; but neither should he receive less than that average.

Paul continues by speaking of honour in a couple of areas that are less evident. Elders should receive emotional support. Paul writes, "Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses" [1 TIMOTHY 5:19]. An elder should be protected from frivolous charges. If he preaches the Word, applying it without favouritism, it is a given that he will irritate some within the congregation. Angered, stung by what they imagine to be an attack on their person, sinful people will lash out in an attempt to injure the elder. Perhaps they hope to silence him, or perhaps they simply want to retaliate and injure him through attempting to sully his reputation or through rendering him ineffectual.

In any case, fellow elders, and the congregation itself, is responsible before God to provide emotional support. In this case, support takes the form of refusal to entertain a charge against the elder unless there are at least two witnesses. Elders will always have detractors; but the people of God are to proceed cautiously in receiving charges against the man of God. There must be a reasonable expectation that the elder would not deliberately violate the Word of God. The congregation must hold a presumption of innocence favouring the elder.

Moreover, if we accept Jesus' instruction concerning conflict resolution within the church, we must accept that the elder is a member of the assembly and must be accorded the same courtesy. Jesus taught that we are to establish every charge brought before the church with multiple witnesses [see MATTHEW 18:15-20]. Elders must have the same protection. This aids in avoiding frivolous charges flung about in a vindictive manner. Unsubstantiated accusations, rumours and innuendo can destroy a pastor. The congregation is responsible to ensure that such does not happen.

Let me be very specific on this point. Whenever you hear a statement that seems slanderous concerning an elder, you should stop the one telling you at that point. Invite them to go with you to the elder to seek to resolve the matter. If the tale bearer declines the opportunity to go, let him or her know that you will go yourself to speak with the elder, relating the tale. Frankly, no less should be expected for any member of the congregation. How much greater is the responsibility to protect the elders from frivolous and/or scurrilous accusations, giving every opportunity for resolution before permitting a few to dishonour the servant of Christ.

Honour demands at least one other consideration that the Apostle addresses. Paul writes, "As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear" [1 TIMOTHY 5:20]. Elders do not get a pass on accountability. To fail to hold them accountable for sin is to disrespect the office and the one holding office.

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DESERVING HONOUR

The elder must not be exposed to slanderous rumours or innuendo; neither should an elder be unaccountable for his speech or his actions. If the people of God will honour God, they will hold the elder accountable for that which is sinful or dishonouring to God or to the office held. An elder should not react with choler when confronted for his actions. He is responsible before God to teach patiently those who question his actions. In a later letter the Apostle writes, “The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth” [2 TIMOTHY 2:24, 25].

What sins qualify for a public rebuke to an elder? Clearly, any violation of the qualifications listed in 1 TIMOTHY 3:2-7 or in TITUS 1:5-9 would merit public rebuke. The rebuke would consist of open exposure of the deviant action, of the errant doctrine or of the wicked attitudes. A sinning elder must have no place to hide. The modern concept that an elder must have cover when he does sin finds no warrant in this portion of the Word. Since he has forfeited credibility, he is disqualified from continuing as an elder. No amount of counselling, no time out to cool down, no period of directed study will suffice to restore such a one to the eldership.

Though he should be treated as a brother, the fact that he has sinned in such an egregious manner that he was removed from eldership must not be casually dismissed. It is through the efforts of errant men who sought to permit elders to slip away quietly or to find another ministry that the congregations of the Lord are brought into disrepute in the eyes of this fallen world. We sin against God, dishonouring Him and dishonouring the office of the elder when we fail to hold the elder accountable for faith and practise.

The discipline is to be applied for one great reason that is too often ignored among contemporary churches: “so that the rest may stand in fear.” When one elder is publicly disgraced because of sin, that action puts a healthy fear into the hearts of the others. Obviously, observing application of discipline in such an instance will put fear into the hearts of the remainder of the members of the assembly. Fear, as is also true of love, is a proper motive for avoiding sin and for obeying God. Again and again, as God instructs Israel to hold sinners accountable for their acts, He appends some akin to this particular statement, “All Israel shall hear and fear and never again do any such wickedness as this among you” [DEUTERONOMY 13:6-11].⁷ The Wise Man has taught us, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” [PROVERBS 9:10].

In this day, I fear that we are more concerned about protecting the reputation of unqualified men than we are of protecting the reputation of the Lord our God. Because we have lowered the standard for eldership, unqualified men fill the pulpits and the people of God pay an awful price for their failure to demand biblical truth applied to the eldership. I do not advocate making a sinning elder grovel; he should be forgiven and accepted by the congregation when he repents. However, forgiveness does not mean that he is to be restored to eldership. To restore those who sin implies that God tolerates sin. To refuse to forgive and accept those who repent presents a God who is austere and unloving. I call on the people of God to find that path which honours God through honouring the elders whom God has given to the churches. Amen.

⁷ See also, DEUTERONOMY 17:12, 13; 19:16-20; ACTS 5:5-11