

1 TIMOTHY 5:19-21

WHEN THE ELDER SINS

“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. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.”¹

The Word of God is quite clear in presenting the concept that churches are composed of saints, believers, each of whom is equally valuable, and hence, each is equally valued. No hierarchy is found among the churches of the New Testament. Nevertheless, churches, like the people comprising the membership of the churches, tend to move to extremes. People are creatures of the extreme; and people are sinners, imagining that their fertile minds are superior to the revealed will of God.

Early in the history of the churches, a transformation took place as elders were elevated to exalted positions that were never intended from what was written. Admittedly, this exaltation of the elders to the position of princes over the churches was a natural phenomenon; but the churches were to be supernatural entities with Christ as head. The elevation of the elders created a new bifurcated congregation, with clergy forming a hierarchy separate from the remainder of the congregation; the most of the congregation was relegated to the new status of laity.

In more recent history, and especially among evangelical churches, pastors frequently have been reduced to individuals hired to function as sort of executive officers of the congregation. The function of the pastors is to “run” the church in a manner pleasing to a board. Pastors are hired to perform certain tasks. According to their job descriptions, pastors are hired to preach what the congregation wants to hear, affirming sinful saints in their self-willed ways and ensuring that enough money comes in to sustain payments on newer and larger facilities. Undoubtedly, some will accuse me of exaggerating; but reviewing the progress of churches during the past century, it is difficult to see the trend among evangelical churches as anything other than what I’ve described.

In the verses comprising the text for this message, the Spirit of God prompts the Apostle to present instructions that should have avoided major errors that plague the churches in this day. It is fair to say that the modern tendency is to ignore the Word in favour of our own supposition on how we are to conduct ourselves in the House of God. Perhaps we would benefit from a reminder of the will of God through study of this particular portion of the Word.

WHEN AN ELDER IS CHARGED — “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.” Complaints against the elders are much more common than the average church goer might imagine. A pastor’s service is a sacred trust based on integrity, credibility and purity of life. Should he be demonstrated to be untrustworthy, inconsistent or impure, his service before God will be rendered ineffectual or even utterly destroyed. Consequently, attacks against his person come with dismaying frequency. It is vital that the elder so live that when gossip and lies are bruited about the people can say with confidence, “That cannot be true; I know my pastor, and he would not do that.”

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THE SIN OF PARTIALITY

Because false accusations are a very real possibility in the service of Christ the Lord, Paul gives Timothy instructions concerning how to respond to accusations. To be blunt, *unsubstantiated accusations, rumour and innuendo are to be ignored*. Let that sink in—unsubstantiated accusations are to be ignored. Accusations that are supposition, accusations that repeat gossip, accusations that promote slander are all to be dismissed out of hand. The congregation is to be protective of the reputation of the eldership.

Gossip and slander are destructive and must not be tolerated among the people of God. Gossip and slander are soundly condemned in the Word of God—it must not be tolerated among God’s holy people. Listen to a few warnings against gossip found in the Word of God.

“A contrary man spreads conflict,
and a gossip separates close friends.”

[PROVERBS 16:28 HCSB]

“Without wood, fire goes out;
without a gossip, conflict dies down.”

[PROVERBS 26:20 HCSB]

“A gossip’s words are like choice food
that goes down to one’s innermost being.”

[PROVERBS 26:22 HCSB]

These proverbs hardly serve as commendations. In fact, they are warnings concerning the dangers of associating with gossips. Let the wise take heed.

Paul found it necessary to confront the Corinthian Christians with their lack of Christian character. Listen as he wonders what he would find when he travelled to Corinth. “I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder” [2 CORINTHIANS 12:20]. Clearly, slander and gossip are seen to be as wicked and these evils are just as detrimental as other forms of misconduct in the child of God.

The Master warned that “from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness” [MARK 7:21, 22]. He clearly identified each of these actions as “evil things,” stating that “they defile a person” [MARK 7:23]. Intuitively, we each agree that He is correct. However, when we are angered by something the preacher says, without thinking we react with rage. We won’t hit him with our fists, but we want to hurt him. So we look for some juicy piece of gossip or we make some slanderous comment; our intent is to make him feel real pain so he will quit hurting our feelings. And we often succeed far beyond our wildest imaginations!

As Christians, we have been commanded, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice” [EPHESIANS 4:31]. This charge is iterated in the Letter to the Christians of Colossae. There, Paul writes, “You must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth” [COLOSSIANS 3:8]. Christians “must not slander anyone, but be peaceable, gentle, showing complete courtesy to all people” [TITUS 3:2]. Do not imagine that Paul is alone in teaching the need to put away slander. Listen to Peter as he instructs the Jewish believers in the Diaspora. “Put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander” [1 PETER 2:1].

An elder is to be accorded the same courtesy as any other believer in the assembly. Christians need to recall the teaching of the Master. “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” [MATTHEW 18:15-20].

How is it that we read these instructions, give general assent to what they say and then ignore them when we are upset? Church members appear often to imagine that the Master said, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell a few others so that they can pray with you.” It seems immaterial whether we imagine our brother (or our sister) has sinned against us; what matters is that we *feel as if* they sinned against us. We want to gather our posse to do what Jesus commanded; forget about gaining a brother! We want justification, not reconciliation. Perhaps it is because we don’t believe obedience will work in our favour. Assuredly, our actions appear to be tinged with pride, coloured with arrogance and an exaggerated self-importance. More likely, we act as we do because of cowardice; we really want someone else to do what we know has the potential for conflict. Surely you know that I am speaking with great sarcasm.

If we are reluctant to confront fellow members of the assembly, despite knowing what Jesus taught, then our reluctance to accord such courtesy to elders has to be the stuff of legend! Even as I speak, throughout the nation there are church families having roast pastor for lunch. Some dear little saint of God is complaining even now, “He didn’t even shake my hand!” Another is grouching about some statement made during the message which didn’t quite set right with him. Another is whining because she didn’t get the recognition she imagined was her due.

I recall a woman who assembled her posse because she didn’t agree with something I taught. She and her posse chose to confront me during a Sunday School class as I was teaching. I patiently pointed to the Scriptures in answer to her challenge, stating from the Word the basis for what I taught. Then, I asked her for the Scripture supporting her position. “That’s why I don’t like to talk to you,” she exclaimed! “You won’t listen to anybody!” Her posse nodded their heads vigorously in agreement with her. Confronted by such irrational demands, I recalled the words of Luther. “Unless I shall be convinced by proofs from the Scriptures, or evident reason (for I trust neither Pope nor councils alone, since it is certain that they have very often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures which I have adduced and my conscience is bound to the words of God.”² Though Luther was resisting the efforts of the papal legate to recant what he had written, the stance applies to the whole teaching of the Word.

To be certain, an elder is responsible to live a holy and godly life. This is true for all Christians, just as Peter has written. “Maintain good conduct among the non-Christians, so that though they now malign you as wrongdoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God when he appears” [1 PETER 2:12 NET BIBLE]. Peter’s words echo those Paul penned to Titus, “Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us” [TITUS 2:7-8].

² Charles E. Hay, “Translator’s Preface,” in **The Theology of Luther in Its Historical Development and Inner Harmony**, translated by Charles E. Hay, vol. 1 (Lutheran Publication Society, Philadelphia PA 1897) 437

Did you notice in the text the phrase, “except on the evidence of two or three witnesses?” I don’t wish to leave the impression that elders are untouchable—they must be held to account just as every other member of the assembly is to be held to account. They are to be shielded from unsubstantiated accusations, from rumour and from innuendo; however, they are not to be shielded from the consequences of their own actions. That has happened too often in the course of church life during the past several decades.

If there are multiple witnesses to the behaviour and/or teaching that is errant, let them come forward and press the charge. This is an apostolic application of standards set under the Law. Moses had written, “A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established” [**DEUTERONOMY 19:15**].

I caution the people of God—*it is a very serious matter to accuse falsely one whom God has appointed to holy office*. The warning of God through the Psalmist must surely apply in this instance: “Touch not my anointed ones, do my prophets no harm” [**PSALM 105:15**]. Anyone who falsely accuses God’s servants is treading on dangerous ground.

Similarly, any of God’s anointed servants who presume to sin against Him are on equally dangerous ground. God will not permit His servant to continue in sin without exposing him. Paul continues in the instruction given to Timothy by moving to that precise issue.

WHEN AN ELDER SINS — “As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.” If a charge is found to be valid, then the sinning elder must be exposed. Such action must obviously appear cold and harsh to many professed Christians. However, I suggest it is only because our love for the praise of man is greater than our love for God that the commands of God seem either cold or harsh in our estimate. Leaders must not be permitted to sin with impunity.

Among the churches of our Lord are far too many professed elders who choose to act wickedly, or who choose to speak what they are told to speak by a board rather than delivering the message of God, or who act unethically. The great tragedy is that when such individuals are caught in their sinful behaviour, they are allowed to drift to the next congregation without consequence where their reprehensible behaviour is repeated.

I had not been in Vancouver very long when a member of a church pulpit committee phoned me to ask if I knew a particular individual. I did not know the man in question, but I asked why this lady was inquiring. The man had pastored in Texas and had moved just across the border in Washington State. He was speaking at a church in the West Point Grey district of Vancouver, and the congregation had decided that they wished to call him to be their pastor. Making the situation more appealing still was the fact that the woman, whom they assumed to be his wife, was quite accomplished on piano. What church wouldn’t benefit from a pianist? It was almost too good to be true. In fact, it was too good to be true.

I suggested that they might wish to speak with people who knew him to see if the story he told was accurate. Since this individual came from a Southern Baptist congregation, I suggested that they phone the Director of Missions with the Association where his previous pastorate had been situated. I provided them with the appropriate name and phone number for a contact. Upon phoning, they discovered that this man had left his wife and family in Texas to flee to Washington with the church secretary. Despite this, they were willing to “give him a chance” to explain himself. As I recall, the man managed to find a church that was looking for a preacher, and he continued on his way. The naiveté of pulpit committees astounds me to this day!

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised at the willingness of that particular congregation to be deceived; the congregation was affiliated with a denomination that "disciplines" deviant preachers by removing them from the pulpit for counselling. After a year of counselling, the preachers are pronounced "cured" and sent back into pastoral service within the denomination.

Such efforts to keep matters quiet, covering over sin, was what first brought me from the Lower Mainland to the interior of the province. A pastor had been removed from his oversight because repeated moral failure had come to light. I learned later that he would be counselled, and when he was "cured," he could re-enter the pastorate. The congregations he had served had been told he was suffering "heart trouble." When I learned of what had taken place, I was forthright with the churches, informing them that the former pastor was indeed suffering "heart trouble"—his was a black heart stained by sin; and at last his sin had found him out.

Perhaps you wonder what sin might disqualify an elder from continued service. We are given the qualifications for accepting one's appointment in the third chapter. "An overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He 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? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil" [1 TIMOTHY 3:2-7]. I suggest that anytime an elder deviates from this standard, he is wandering into sin.

In our text, Paul uses a present tense participle, pointing to ongoing action; therefore, "persist in sin" is a good translation. Many older translations leave the impression that a single sin is sufficient to disqualify an elder. Such a view leads to a continuing search for "the sin" that will disqualify. Some sins are sufficiently egregious to merit public rebuke; however, the Apostle envisions a scenario in which an elder has been accused by multiple witnesses, an investigation has been conducted, the sinful behaviour has been verified and the elder is held culpable. There is nothing left but to publicly rebuke the sinning elder.

I have observed that the churches of our Lord are composed of members who often imagine that they lawyers; thus, precise legal steps must be taken in order to fulfil what is written in the Word. It sometimes appears that the simplicity of the Word is being replaced by legal briefs. The Ten Commandments have become one hundred fifty pages of legal clarification, and before an elder is rebuked, he must be assured of his "rights." Tragically, sinners appear to be better versed in the constitution and bylaws than they are in the Word of God.

To satisfy the legal scholars found among many of the congregations of our Lord, let me state that before rebuke or public exposure is performed, it is assumed that private confrontation has taken place and repentance and reconciliation has been sought. Before the elders ever weighed the charge that was brought, it must be assumed that those bringing the charge have approached the elder and sought reconciliation and repentance.

These efforts seeking repentance and reconciliation should have been undertaken in the spirit of GALATIANS 6:1-5. There, the Apostle has written, "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load."

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Paul teaches that the elder who persists in sin is to be rebuked in the presence of all. The word “all” refers to the entirety of the congregation—the word does not refer solely to the other elders of the assembly. The instruction means that sinning elders are not to be permitted to slip away from the congregation under the pretext of needing a rest or with the subterfuge of discovery of a previously undisclosed illness or malady; sinning elders are to be held accountable before the people whose trust has been violated. If we will honour the Lord and obey His Word, a sinning elder must have nowhere to hide. The word “rebuke” is a Greek term that speaks of exposure, of reproof, of open conviction.

According to the Word, “Everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be *exposed*” [JOHN 3:20]. Christians are admonished, “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead *expose* them” [EPHESIANS 5:11]. Elders are responsible to “hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to *rebuke* those who contradict it” [TITUS 1:9]. Just as elders are responsible to *rebuke* those who are liars, evil beasts and lazy gluttons [see TITUS 1:13], so they are to be held accountable before the congregation when they sin. The Spirit of God *convicts* of sin [see JOHN 16:8]. Where God’s Spirit resides and reigns, sin is exposed and sinners are convicted. All the verses which I have referenced use the same word that refers to the action demanded when elders sin. Attempts to keep sin quiet and efforts to allow a sinning elder to leave quietly create chaos and generate misunderstanding in a congregation.

The sins of one in leadership are far more serious than the sins of others. To be certain, all sin is an offence to Holy God; however, the sin of one in leadership has immediate impact on those over whom he is appointed. James says that we who teach will be judged more severely. “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” [JAMES 3:1]. Whether the elder who sins repents or whether he refuses to repent is not the issue. When he sins, his credibility is forfeited and he is disqualified from ministry. Public rebuke makes it clear to all why he is no longer in leadership.

I am fully aware of the teaching of the Word concerning God’s mercy. I am equally aware of the teaching that the one who sins is urged to avoid compounding his sin by attempting to hide his transgression. I, also, have read the Proverbs,

“Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper,
but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.”

[PROVERBS 28:13]

What is at issue is not one’s standing with God, but one’s continuation in the position to which God had previously appointed that individual.

Paul is quite clear on why this action is to be taken before all. “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]. Though the sinning elder will have been removed from pastoral oversight, it is to be hoped that he will be restored to fellowship. However, note that a rebuke that is not successful in dealing with the offender may be effective in the life of an onlooker. The church is the Body of Christ. As such, we are to keep her welfare paramount in our mind at all times. We are to seek to promote her spiritual health as we seek Christ’s glory. We do this through considering the impact of our actions on the response of congregants to the presence of the Lord among His people. Christians who observe the congregation seeking purity before the Lord will not be tempted to treat the issue of righteousness in a casual manner.

I am compelled to make an observation concerning congregational discipline in this day. Among modern churches, the theological category of sin has been replaced with the psychological concept of therapy. This is evident from the response of the denominational leaders who refuse to hold a morally compromised minister accountable by removing him permanently from the pastorate. The thought that sin can be cured is an affront to Holy God. Today, church members justify sinful behaviour by claiming to make poor choices or by failing to live up to expectations; but they nevertheless argue they do not sin. Confession of sin is now passé and hopelessly outdated in the view of many Christians.

Individual church members now claim an exaggerated zone of personal privacy and moral autonomy. The congregation has been reduced to a legal society composed of individuals in voluntary association; therefore, they assert that neither the elders nor the corporate body have any right to intrude into this self-created space. Churches have forfeited all responsibility to confront even the most public sins of the members. Churches now leave moral matters to the domain of the individual conscience rather than holding one another to account in accordance with the Word. We are more likely tacitly to ignore sinning church members than we are to demonstrate our love through correcting fellow saints as instructed by the Word.

In line with this new and unbiblical thinking, pastors, rather than leading their congregations have followed. Confessing sin is neither done among the churches, nor is it encouraged. We are uncomfortable when we hear fellow church members confess their sin. Elders defy anyone who would challenge their proclivity for sin, just as congregants defy any attempt to apply biblical standards for living. Ultimately, the churches are without discipline. As stated years ago by a Baptist divine, “When discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it.”³

KEEPING THE CHARGE — “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.” Elders were assuming exaggerated importance even among the early congregations. It often takes considerable courage to attack a beloved elder. The longer an elder has been present, the more difficult it is to oppose him. Thus, Paul reveals the gravity of this situation when he calls to witness God, Christ Jesus and the elect angels.

Solemnly charging those who read his letters is not something that the Apostle did lightly. Some things were thought to be sufficiently vital that the Apostle would solemnly charge his reader. In addition to our text, in his second letter to Timothy, the Apostle has written, “***I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus***, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” [2 TIMOTHY 4:1, 2].

When insisting that Timothy must teach the congregation the truth, Paul charged, “Remind [the congregation] of [the need to focus on Christ], and ***charge them before God*** not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers” [2 TIMOTHY 2:14].

Among his final words to Timothy in this first missive are these, “As for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ***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” [1 TIMOTHY 6:11-14].

³ J. L. Dagg, **A Treatise on Church Order** (The Southern Baptist Publication Society, Charleston, SC 1858), p. 274

Though Paul did not often issue a solemn charge in his writings, apparently he did issue such charges verbally on other occasions. Writing the Thessalonian Christians, Paul reminded them of just such a charge he had given when teaching them of the necessity for sexual purity. “We ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, *as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you*. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness” [1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-7].

Here is the question for the churches of this day late in the Church Age—If the Apostle took the issue of accountability of the elders so seriously, why do the churches today treat that accountability as lightly as they do? Is it not because we are substituting psychology for the reign of Christ the Lord? Are we not trading the glory of God’s reign through His Word for the best learning we can hire? If we accept that Paul is stating that our actions are conducted before the watching eyes of God, of Christ Jesus and of the holy angels, then it emphasises what he meant when he insisted that sinning elders are to be rebuked “in the presence of all.” The phrase, “in the presence of” is identical in both the TWENTIETH and the TWENTY-FIRST verses. Accountability is expected before the entire assembly with the whole of Heaven watching.

I stress this point because it is so vital. The conduct of our worship is witnessed by the holy angels, just as it is witnessed by the Risen Son of God and by the Father. Commenting that the angels witness our carelessness, rashness, ambition and unfaithfulness, Calvin wrote that the angels are present as spectators “because they have been commanded to take care of the Church.” Then, he comments that the individual “must be worse than stupid” if his or her “indolence and carelessness are not shaken by this single consideration, that the government of the Church is under the eye of God and the angels.”⁴

We do not merely “do” church—we are in the presence of the True and Living God when we gather to worship. Awareness of God will transform our worship from a mere performance to what it is intended to be—the ascription of glory to Him who is true and who is alive. When we fail to act with impartiality in applying the dicta of God, we must anticipate His displeasure. Ultimately, He shall assuredly desert the congregation that merely goes through the motions of reciting a liturgy without recognising His presence with us.

Let me state my deep concern—a concern that I’ve voiced so frequently that I fear it may be losing its impact. I fear that we *go* to church, never remembering that we *are* the church. Because this is true, we are unaware of the presence of the Living Christ among His churches. While he was worshipping, John saw the Risen Master. Where Jesus stood is instructive for us. “I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man” [REVELATION 1:12, 13].

The awesome personage John saw was in fact the Risen Saviour [see REVELATION 1:17, 18]; and He was standing in the midst of the lampstands [REVELATION 1:13], which He identified as representing the churches [SEE REVELATION 1:20]. Moreover, He holds in His hands the messengers, the elders, the pastors, of those churches [see REVELATION 1:16, 20]. We do well to remember that whenever we meet, the Son of God is in our midst so long as seek Him.

⁴ John Calvin and William Pringle, Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon (Logos Bible Software, Bellingham, WA 2010) 143

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So long as the messenger of God faithfully delivers the Word of God, he is held in the hand of the Risen Saviour. When that man ceases to declare faithfully the Word of the Lord, he will be rejected and the church must hold him accountable for his perfidy. In the same manner, when the church that has enjoyed the presence of the Risen Son of God ceases to obey Him, permitting error to be disseminated from the pulpit, permitting one with filthy hands and a dirty heart to speak the Word of the Lord or permitting one who is disobedient to the just demands of the Saviour, Christ shall write “Ichabod” across the doors and leave her to her own devices.

Clearly, Paul means for the church to maintain the principles he has presented without bias, without prejudice, without partiality. Surely, the Apostle means that the relationship between congregation and elders must be maintained as set out in the Word of God. A grave sin within Christendom is the division of God’s people into clergy and laity. No such division is even suggested in the New Testament. Admittedly, this segregation began quite early in the history of the churches. However, such bifurcation in the assemblies of the Lord grew out of the fertile imagination of men and not as result of any lack of clarity in the Word of God.

Two serious distortions of the divine intent arise from this error. Either the elders will be effectively unaccountable to the assembly, permitting the rise of an ecclesiastical hierarchy; or the congregation will gravitate toward a business model in which the elders are seen as CEOs who are hired and dismissed at the whim of the stake holders. Either situation is a distortion of the intent of the Living God as revealed in His Word. Either condition must, of necessity, tend toward increasing error with at best, brief moments of greater clarity.

Ecclesiastical hierarchies are foreign to the New Testament. There are no bishops in the modern sense in the New Testament. The elder is identified as the pastor, or shepherd, of the congregation. The terms “elder” and “pastor” are interchangeable with the term “bishop” or “overseer.” The three concepts are equivalent, each referring to the same office within the church. Addressing the elders of Ephesus, Paul cautioned, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” [ACTS 20:28]. Though the Apostle is addressing the elders [see ACTS 20:17], he speaks of them as “overseers.” Moreover, he admonishes them “to care for” the church of God. The word translated “care for” is the same word translated “pastor” or “shepherd.” Many contemporary translations make this quite plain. For instance, one translation reads, “Pay attention to yourselves and to the entire flock in which the Holy Spirit has placed you as bishops to be shepherds for God’s church which he acquired with his own blood.”⁵

Peter also uses all three terms interchangeably when he writes, “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” [1 PETER 5:1, 2].

⁵ **GOD’S WORD Translation** (Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, MI 1995); see also, e.g. **The New English Bible** (Oxford University Press; Cambridge University Press, New York, NY 1970); **The Holy Bible: New International Version** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1984); **The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version** (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN 1989); **The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation**, 2nd ed. (American Bible Society, New York, NY 1992); **New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update** (The Lockman Foundation, LaHabra, CA 1995); **The Revised English Bible** (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; New York; Melbourne; Madrid; Cape Town; Singapore; Sao Paulo; Delhi; Dubai; Tokyo 1996)); **New International Reader’s Version. 1st ed.** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1998); **The Everyday Bible: New Century Version** (Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, TN 2005); **The NET Bible First Edition** (Biblical Studies Press 1996-2006); **The New International Version** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 2011); **International Standard Version** (ISV Foundation, Yorba Linda, CA 2011)

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THE SIN OF PARTIALITY

Elders are to shepherd (pastor) the flock of God, exercising oversight (acting as bishops). Writing Timothy, Paul gives qualifications for “overseers” [1 TIMOTHY 3:1-7]. Writing Titus, he gives the same qualifications, designating that those to be appointed are “elders” [TITUS 1:5-9]. The argument that a bishop is a “pastor to pastors” fails to find justification in Scripture. Ultimately, how can one find a conclusion to such hierarchy? For there will always be need for another shepherd because we are, after all, sinful men in need of guidance.

It is a grave sin when modern evangelicalism treats the elder as though he was hired. This is a grave sin because it subjects God’s appointment to mortal oversight and shows disdain or despite for what God does. To imagine that a church hires an elder is to regard God’s gift with contempt. Moreover, to think to hire the pastor is to reduce the Body of Christ to just another organisation modelled after the dying institutions of this fallen world.

The elder must not be treated as though he was hired; the man of God is a member of the assembly. More times than I can remember, I’ve found it necessary to remind some church member that I am a member of the congregation; just like any other member, I have a vote when pushed on the matter. The elder is not a wandering planetary orb drifting briefly into orbit about the church only to be flung back into space at some later point. The elder does not intersect with the assembly tangentially—he is a member of the Body, integral to the health of the assembly just as is true for each individual whom God places within the congregation. The elders are members, accountable to the congregation corporately.

It is an equally grave sin to treat the elder as though he is beyond being challenged. Tragically, in churches about us will be found “boards” that are essentially herds, sounders of “Yes men” appointed to approve of whatever the pastor desires. It is an elder’s responsibility to persuade when he proposes a direction for the church to go. Those gathered about him are responsible to think for themselves, to weigh the direction the congregation should go and to seek the mind of the Lord. If the elder acts conscientiously and in accordance with the Word, the Spirit of God will give the congregation unity. Nevertheless, the elder is not to be placed on a pedestal as though he can do no wrong.

What has Paul taught us? To be certain, elders should be honoured, not because they are superior to others within the congregation, but because we recognise these gifted men are given by the hand of God who loves His people and delights to give good gifts. However, the elders must not be permitted to distort the Word of God. Neither must they be permitted to become a law unto themselves, ignoring morality and ethics as outlined in the Word. The church must be prepared to strike a godly balance when interacting with the elders.

Paul has written, “Pay to all what is owed to them ... respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed” [ROMANS 13:7]. If we are agreed that secular rulers are to be respected and honoured, then assuredly the elders whom God gives us likewise deserve respect and honour. Respect means that we will not accept blindly all that they say; but when they open the Word of God to us and direct us in the paths outlined therein, we respect them for their labours. It does no honour to an elder either to treat him as a hired hand or to accept unquestioningly all he says. We honour God through honouring those whom God gives us. Amen.