

1 TIMOTHY 5:22-25

TAKE YOUR TIME

“Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure. (No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.) The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.”¹

Paul has been addressing issues related to the relationship of elders and the congregation. As witnessed in previous studies, the Apostle advocated honour for those who labour among the saints, acknowledging them for their investment in the lives of God’s people. He also outlined the necessity of protecting the elders against unwarranted assaults on their character. The Apostle was not unaware of the potential for sin among the elders—they are, after all, mere men capable of base sin. When elders sin, the Apostle was unhesitating in demanding that they be exposed and removed from their position.

When he writes the verses of our text, it should be obvious that he is continuing addressing issues related to the eldership. He gives Timothy two prohibitions and a charge in the first verse and an explanation in the final two verses. Some have concluded that the Apostle is simply tying together loose ends of thought. However, it seems apparent to me that he is doing much more than merely tying up loose ends. The instructions provided would go far toward eliminating problems related to the appointment of unqualified elders.

SIN IN HASTE; REPENT AT LEISURE — “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.” Let’s be very clear that Paul is not speaking of ordination in the same manner in which we think of ordination in this day. He speaks of the laying on of hands, and several possibilities could be suggested without appeal to the modern concept of the ceremony that is identified as ordination. To be certain, the Apostle appears to be cautioning against a hasty elevation of an individual to the eldership. Perhaps that was what had been done in the case of the sinful elders against whom Paul has been speaking. This would fit quite well with what Paul had written earlier in the letter concerning qualifications for eldership: “[The potential elder] must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil” [1 TIMOTHY 3:6].

Alternatively, some modern commentators suggest that Paul was warning against extending a hasty welcome to a former elder seeking to assume again the position he once held. A growing number of churches today are quite prepared to restore elders to holy office once they have received counselling and expressed remorse. However, this particular suggestion appears to be unlikely on several points. First, there is no evidence that the early churches restored sinning elders to eldership. Also, laying on of hands in the New Testament appears to be associated with accepting divine appointment to sacred office and not to a supposed reappointment. Finally, such an understanding does a disservice to the New Testament teaching concerning forgiveness. Nowhere in the New Testament are believers urged to use caution in restoring a penitent sinner to fellowship within the congregation.

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The laying on of hands as individuals were set apart to holy office is witnessed on several occasions in the New Testament. The first servants (deacons) of the congregation in Jerusalem were set apart as the Apostles laid hands on them [see **ACTS 6:1-6**]. This action serves as the model for elders setting apart deacons with prayer and laying on of hands. The elders act to receive, as it were, the gift of those who are chosen to serve the congregation.

When Paul and Barnabas were appointed by God to launch out on the first missionary journey, the assembled prophets and teachers set them apart for that service by fasting, praying and laying on of hands. This account reads, “There were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off” [**ACTS 13:1-3**].

Paul reminds Timothy that the council of elders accepted his appointment by the act of laying their hands on him [see **1 TIMOTHY 4:14**]. Similarly, the Apostle will speak on conferring the gift of God through “the laying on of [his] hands” [see **2 TIMOTHY 1:6**].

However, laying on of hands is never associated with restoration of a sinning elder. Though the discussion addresses discipline of sinning elders, there is not a hint of restoration, either after a period of counselling, a time-out or an expression of remorse. The concept of restoration appears to be a modern invention growing out of a saccharine view of holy orders.

I am likewise appalled that anyone could suggest that a congregation should be cautious in restoring penitent sinners. Let’s be very clear that the purpose of church discipline is to seek restoration of fellowship. This is evident from Jesus’ instructions concerning confrontation of those with whom we have a grievance. Jesus instructed, “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**]. Restoration of fellowship is the paramount goal throughout this pericope.

It is fascinating that Peter blurted out his own standard after the Master had given this instruction. “Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times’” [**MATTHEW 18:21, 22**].

Peter appears to have thought that extending forgiveness to the same individual seven times should be commendable; he was angling for Jesus’ commendation. However, the Master stunned him—and us—by saying, in effect, that forgiveness is to be unlimited! We are not to keep count. So long as a wayward brother or sister expresses contrition and seeks restoration, we are to receive them. The people of God have no business keeping count! By this criterion, when an elder is disciplined and removed from office, though that individual may no longer serve as an elder, the church is to receive him, restoring him to fellowship as a member! Our problem is that we struggle to separate fellowship and function. We have seized on that famous verse from the Book of Confession that admonishes us to “forgive and forget,” and we know we can’t forget. Forgiveness allows restoration of fellowship, but the consequences of choice continue.

Let's be clear, then—Paul's concern in the first verse of our text is the prevention of unqualified elders from being elevated to holy office. The best way to avoid such an error is to move with deliberation and caution *before* appointment. Once an elder has been installed in office, the sole remedy for sin is confrontation and removal—and that action is permanent.

Ordination is seemingly distorted in the mind of modern believers. Ordination is thought to mark the ordinand as an “expert” in religious matters. The laity of the churches often views it as sort of a certification of proficiency designating the holder as a specialist. I find it intriguing that some of the most distinguished of God's spokesmen were without ordination. As one example, Spurgeon, arguably the most notable Baptist divine produced by Great Britain, served without benefit of ordination. Spurgeon was quite vocally opposed to ordination as a lingering evidence of Popery among the people of God.² A surprising number of God's choice servants have been unordained.

It is always a bit of a surprise for Christians to discover there is no mention of what we call ordination in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God is said to ordain judgement³ and He ordains peace.⁴ Likewise, God ordains salvation.⁵ In fairness, Aaron and his sons were said to have been ordained to the priesthood;⁶ but Israel ignored the commands of God and ordained whom they willed as priests.⁷ What is obvious is that the word speaks of appointment; and God appoints judgement, peace and salvation. Moreover, the priests were appointed by God; those appointed by man were never accepted as priests by the righteous.

I am well aware that older translations of the Bible did speak of ordaining elders. Paul left Titus in Crete to “appoint elders in every town” [TITUS 1:5]. The King James Version, the Authorised Version and the Douay-Rheims Bible all speak of Titus ordaining these individuals. However, in light of the passages we have considered thus far in the Pastoral Letters and in light of the words employed, it is obvious that the passage speaks of appointment rather than a formal ceremony. The word focuses more on the appointment than it does on ceremony or the process.⁸

In the initial centuries of Church History, the concept of ordination was murky at best. Perhaps as some have argued, there exist faint traces of ordination in the New Testament; but it is almost impossible to demonstrate the act in the early centuries of the Faith. By the early years of the Third Century a clear divide between clergy and laity had been established—a divide that was absent in the first blush of the Faith. As the role of the church expanded, the importance of ordination likewise grew, conferring awesome authority over the faithful.⁹

² C. H. Spurgeon, “Fragments of Popery among Nonconformists,” *The Sword and Trowel*: 1874, 94-100; C. H. Spurgeon, **The Letters of Charles Haddon Spurgeon** (Marshall Brothers, Limited, London; Edinburgh; New York 1923) 103-105; C. H. Spurgeon, **C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography, Compiled from His Diary, Letters, and Records, by His Wife and Private Secretary, 1834-1854, vol. 1** (Curtis & Jennings, Cincinnati (sic); Chicago; St. Louis 1898) 355-60

³ See JEREMIAH 15:3 (HOLMAN CHRISTIAN STANDARD BIBLE)

⁴ ISAIAH 26:12

⁵ PSALM 44:4

⁶ EXODUS 28:41; 29:9, 35; LEVITICUS 8:33

⁷ See 2 CHRONICLES 13:9

⁸ See καθίστημι (article), William Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, **A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature: a Translation and Adaption of the Fourth Revised and Augmented Edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Worterbuch Zu Den Schrift En Des Neuen Testaments Und Der Ubrigen Urchrislichen Literatur** (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL 1979); Louw Nida 37.104, Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, **Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains** (United Bible Societies, New York, NY 1996)

⁹ See E. Glenn Hinson, “Ordination in Christian History,” *Review and Expositor*, 78:4 (1981) 482-495

That is precisely the point of my concern for the churches in this day—we have created a strange ceremony in which the ceremony itself is more important than is the character or qualification of those appointed. We tend to focus more on the authority we deem to have been conferred than we do on the responsibility that attends the office. In keeping with modern views, we are prepared to concede authority to those elevated to holy office without attendant responsibility to fulfil the duties of the office. Paul is prescient in seeking to avoid this problem through giving these instructions to Timothy. We do well to heed the apostolic advice.

Undoubtedly, the practise of ordination has brought inordinate harm to the churches of our Lord. Ordination has segregated the people of God into Clergy and Laity. Ordination as practised during the past century has served as a basis for conferring tax benefits on Christian ministers, opening the door to unqualified individuals to plead for ordination in order to obtain those same benefits. Consequently, an increasing number of denominations and churches ordain women to ministry—first as chaplains, then as ordinands to specialised ministries and finally as pastors or priests. Now, other equally unqualified and unsuitable individuals argue they “deserve” the same tax benefits conferred by ordination. Thus, with the best of intentions, churches have ensured an unholy union of church and state through accepting this handout.

What should we witness in the act of laying on hands? Reviewing the Gospels, we will see Jesus laying hands on individuals. For instance, He laid His hands on children when He blessed them [see **MATTHEW 19:13-15**; see also **MARK 10:13-16**]. Jesus also sometimes laid hands on those whom He would heal [see **MARK 6:5**; **8:22-25**; **LUKE 4:40**; **13:10-13**]. However, there is no indication that the Master laid hands either on the Apostles or on the seventy-two when He sent them out [see **LUKE 10:1**]. Laying hands on the sick was not common in the days of the Apostles, though on one occasion Paul did lay his hands on a sick individual [**ACTS 28:8**].

What is seen in the Acts is that the Apostles and then elders of the churches did lay their hands on those individuals who were being set apart to holy office. This act of laying on hands has roots in the Old Testament, when either the one coming before the Lord with a sin offering, or the high priest acting on behalf of the assembly laid hands on the sacrificial animal to identify with it [e.g. **LEVITICUS 4:15**]. In a similar manner, when the Levites were set apart to service, the people laid hands on them [**NUMBERS 8:10**]; and Moses laid his hands on Joshua when leadership of the nation was transferred [see **NUMBERS 27:18-23**; **DEUTERONOMY 34:9**]. In the Old Testament, as in the New Testament, the act of laying on of hands symbolised solidarity, union and identification. When an individual had hands laid on him, it was affirmation of suitability of the individual for the office to which he was being appointed and it was a sign of public acceptance of that individual for the assigned position.

Let that sink in! Follow the thread of thought and consider what has been stated. When the congregation has chosen deacons, the elders lay hands on those chosen signifying acceptance of these individuals as servants for the congregation and as a sign that they affirm the suitability of those so chosen. The elders are acting publicly at that time on behalf of the congregation. Likewise, when an individual is accepted into eldership, the elders of the congregation lay hands on that person as a sign of acceptance and as a sign affirming the suitability of the individual for eldership. In doing this, the elders are acting publicly on behalf of the congregation. The elders are not separate from the congregation; they are integral to the congregation!

It is important to note the final clause of Paul’s instruction: “keep yourself pure.” Failure to take care in the process of appointment could mean that the elders could participate in the sins of others. Should the elders be indifferent, it would mean that they were culpable of sin themselves and thus became partners in the sins of their appointees when they fell short.

The construction of the latter portion of the verse implies that Paul is addressing an action that was then taking place. Whether through youthful inexperience or simply through a lack of caution, Timothy appears to have been participating in appointing unqualified men to holy office. Literally, Paul writes, “Stop participating in the sins of others.” Through permitting unqualified men to assume the office of elder, Timothy shared in their sin.

Early in this letter, Paul had warned that false teachers at Ephesus were teaching errant doctrine [1 TIMOTHY 1:3] and devoting themselves to myths and fantasies [1 TIMOTHY 1:4]. They were guilty of promoting impurity, creating polluted consciences and generating insincere faith [1 TIMOTHY 1:5]. The false teachers appear to have been doctrinal neophytes [1 TIMOTHY 1:6, 7] at best. The hard truth is that Timothy may have elevated them to holy office. Thus, Paul warns that he must assume culpability for their sinful actions. Though the elder does not perform the particular sin, if he has promoted unqualified people into office he must share in their sin; he becomes a participant in their evil acts.

In issuing this warning, Paul agrees with John. Recall the Apostle of Love’s prohibition against welcoming errant teachers. “Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works” [2 JOHN 7-11].

There is a danger that is endemic to the modern pastorate, though it is not often thought to be a danger by most congregants. Early in my service in Canada, I enjoyed a warm friendship with an elder in another communion. Rod had been a missionary to Ethiopia and was now serving a congregation located close by the congregation I then served. On one occasion we were speaking of the particular hardships of the mission field contrasted with the difficulties of ministering in Canada. Rod volunteered that the denomination in which he served had insisted on a battery of psychological tests before recommending him to the congregation he served. The testing revealed a significant deficit in Rod’s life. This particular deficit did not disqualify from pastoral service, but it was a weakness nevertheless—Rod wanted to please others.

The desire to please others is a threat to all who minister in the modern assembly. Culture itself trains us to seek approval from those we serve; society expects that the minister of Christ will be “hail fellow well-met.” And though the Word specifically warns against being “people-pleasers” [see EPHESIANS 6:5; COLOSSIANS 3:22], most ministers of Christ endeavour to be good natured and agreeable. No servant of Christ enjoys living in the negative mood, always appearing contrary and opposed to every idea floated by members of the congregation. I don’t believe any rational elder enjoys saying “No.” However, the servant of God must keep his eye focused on the One who appointed him to service and not on pleasing those whom he serves.

The aged Apostle speaks quite plainly, cautioning that the younger man must steel himself to perform the hard tasks. The implied warning anticipates what the Apostle will write in a later letter concerning the need for the elder to inure himself to perform the hard tasks. “You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him” [2 TIMOTHY 2:1-4]. The call to share in suffering is a common theme in this final letter [see 2 TIMOTHY 1:8; 4:5].

Thus, Paul gives this final admonition to the young theologian: “Keep yourself pure.” The words he used are freighted with significance. “Keep” is a strong word implying the need “to guard” or “to keep watch over.”¹⁰ The concept emphasised is the exercise of watchful care. Paul is saying that Timothy has a duty before God and before the congregation to be especially watchful in associations and in giving approval of that which does not merit approval.

Timothy is to remain watchful to keep himself pure. The word “pure” is not concerned with ritual purity; rather it focuses on moral purity. Paul has already admonished Timothy to avoid youthful indiscretion. “Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” [1 TIMOTHY 4:12]. It is not possible to segregate purity from speech, conduct, love and faith; the elder’s life is a complete package. Purity is vital to the conduct of the believers’ lives, to say nothing of the service of elders presented before the Lord. At the end of his life, the Apostle used this same verb when speaking of his own service. “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” [2 TIMOTHY 4:7]. The man of God must not only teach moral purity from the pulpit; he must model moral purity for the flock.

James says that “The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere” [JAMES 3:17]. Thus, purity is essential to wisdom; failure to maintain purity would mean that the elder was liable to stumble into strange, discordant and unrighteous acts.

In an earlier letter to the saints in Philippi, the Apostle had urged the people of God to focus on that which is good, including purity. “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” [PHILIPPIANS 4:8].

Let me be practical rather than being merely esoteric— Paul used the second person singular reflexive pronoun, “yourself.” In doing this, the Apostle lifts Timothy’s eyes off the problems then facing him—false teachers, erring elders, defiant women, challenges from within and from without. Timothy is to watch himself, considering his life so that he might ensure that he remains in a position to lead in matters concerning appointment to congregational office, matters concerning church discipline and matters concerning decisions of how he should deal with false teaching while solidifying the eldership.

It is easy to become caught up in trying to understand the genesis of error and the motivation of errant people, forgetting first priorities. An elder cannot afford to neglect God’s priorities. It has always been a mystery to me why anyone would want to study the theology of the cults. Will attempting to find the flaws in their thinking bring them to faith? If we want to make an impact for Christ, we need to know what we believe and why we believe it. It seems tragic that so many people are able to articulate the error of others despite being unable to state what they believe. However, the surest way to expose error is to understand truth thoroughly.

The elder of the congregation is responsible to know the truth, being thoroughly acquainted with the truth. Let me say quite clearly that the pastor of the church is the congregation’s theologian. Though many church members decry preaching theology, a thorough grasp of doctrine is essential to sound teaching. You will recall that Timothy was charged with warning the false teachers against teaching different doctrine [see 1 TIMOTHY 1:3]. The elder must always bear in mind that one major work of the pastorate is to establish the saints through providing sound (healthful) teaching. What is taught is vital, and how truth is delivered is likewise essential. Both facets are important to building a healthy congregation.

¹⁰ τηρέω (article), Arndt et. al., op. cit.; Louw Nida 13.32, Louw and Nida, op. cit.

In an earlier missive to the Ephesian congregation, Paul had taught that the Master “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].

SIN AND RIGHTEOUSNESS — “The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.” There was an apparent break in the Apostle’s thoughts, but these two verses bring Timothy back to what is essential in selection and discipline of elders.

It is possible to share in the sins of some people, and should Timothy fail to exercise discernment, he will assuredly participate in the evil of wicked men whom he has appointed. Paul is speaking rather broadly at this point; he does not give specifics, leaving that to the discretion of the younger minister. It may be of interest that Paul uses the term “sins” only here and in verse 22. It is not that he is unaware of sinful behaviour; he simply does not speak of sins.

It is wise for modern church goers to remember that our contemporary habit of refusing to exercise discernment is not a strength. “I’m okay, you’re okay” is not a biblical standard. Rather, sinful behaviour needs to be recognised and exposed. What is in view is the sinful behaviour of those seeking elevation to the eldership. When Paul says that some sins go before to judgement, he is not referring either to the final judgement of the lost or to the judgement of believers before the Judgement Seat of Christ; he is speaking of the assessment of the assembly concerning suitability to serve. It will be necessary for Timothy to accept responsibility to guide the congregation in assessing suitability for service.

Focus for a moment on sins that appear only after some time. We can only imagine what Paul had in mind when he wrote this; however, the fact that he speaks of several specific sins soon after writing this may give an indication of what he was thinking. “If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs” [1 TIMOTHY 6:4-10].

Here, Paul warns against a grave triumvirate of sinful behaviour—pride, conflict and materialism. It is not always possible to recognise the fruits of pride, but when it is unchecked, controversy is the inevitable result. The proud person is incapable of stepping back from an argument—he must win whatever the cost. Thus, he is prone to quarrel, expressing feelings of envy, generating dissension, slander and a mind marked by suspicion. Constant friction with the flock must result. Remember, this all arises from pride; and it is not always possible to identify pride. This is why it is essential to vet those being considered for elevation to eldership.

Conflict does not always manifest itself immediately. There may be conflict in the home that will be exposed only after an extended period. There may often times be conflict with other believers that becomes apparent only with the passage of time. It is sufficient to say that conflict with a succession of individuals or conflict with a succession of churches, may—and I emphasise *may*—be indicative of a soul that is in conflict with Him who appoints to holy service.

I do need to caution that not all conflict is necessarily a mark against the elder. The basis for conflict is important. Some battles are necessary. In fact, failure to fight some battles would be grounds for rejection as a servant of God. Resisting error of necessity generates heated animosity toward the servant of God. The Apostle will assert in his final letter to Timothy, “All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” [2 TIMOTHY 3:12, 13].

Push back against Paul was so severe at times that his life was threatened. Listen to the recitation of his life and service, noting especially the attempts against his person and against his life. “Whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure” [2 CORINTHIANS 11:21-27].

Similarly, it is not always possible to identify immediately materialism in the life of an elder. Materialism is endemic in contemporary society; it is unreasonable to imagine that elders do not struggle with the desire to possess. However, failure to identify this character flaw will result in grave harm to the congregation. An elder that is unduly occupied with position, who is more than moderately concerned about income or who always appears to be caught up in controversy may be an indicative of serious trouble for the congregation.

I have already staked out the position that the congregation must be generous toward the elders. However, the elders do not serve for money. Those who are mature will have learned to say with the Apostle, “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].

Just as sins are eventually outed, so good works cannot be hidden forever. Some acts are obvious—they cannot be hidden. If an elder is compassionate, his compassion will be evident especially to those who are recipients of his service. If an elder is generous, his generosity will be evident to those of his parish. If an elder is humble, he will exhibit a characteristic ease when challenged on important matters—he will stand firm without being pugnacious. If the elder is peaceable, his efforts to secure peace will be evident even to those seeking a fight. If an elder pursues Christ, that gentle call upward will have a positive impact on all who know him. Qualities that honour God will become evident in time; they cannot remain permanently hidden. Genuine character always rises to the top. The absence of a good reputation should not lead automatically to rejection; but the absence of a bad reputation is no evidence of truly desirable qualities. Timothy will need to take time to know those who are to become elders.

THE INTERLUDE — “No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.” There is this personal touch in the missive, though it likely has a relationship to the instructions Paul has provided concerning the false teachers. Paul had pointed out that the false teachers were emphasising aestheticism as a lifestyle. He had warned, “The Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth” [1 TIMOTHY 4:1-3].

One need not engage in fanciful speculation to realise that Timothy was undoubtedly cautious as result of their errant teaching. He could have been reactionary, refusing to drink any wine lest he lose opportunity to teach. I find it more likely that he had personally adopted a policy of abstinence. I rather suspect the latter instead of the former because it would fit with Paul’s teaching elsewhere that would have been delivered while Timothy was with the Apostle.

“Let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

“Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” [ROMANS 14:13-23].

This is in keeping with his summary statement delivered to the Corinthian Christians. “Sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble” [1 CORINTHIANS 8:12, 13].

Thus, Paul gives the young pastor some fatherly advice. Paul is not advocating social drinking, but he is advocating safe drinking. In the ancient world, wine was used to purify water. They did not have filters as we do, and boiling water could be problematic. Therefore, it was common to mix wine with water to render it somewhat safer. The usual mixture was one part wine to three or four parts water in order to kill microbes that could be present. Remember that the wine was relatively weak compared to what is available today. The *saccharomyces cerevisiae* yeast employed in making wine is relatively intolerant of high alcohol content. The yeast ultimately kills itself off before the wine becomes what the Bible identifies as “strong drink.” Most wines sold today are fortified—that is, alcohol is added to make them more potent.

Paul’s advice is clearly geared toward pure water/wine for drinking—the instructions are “for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.” Timothy was having some ongoing problem with digestion, and Paul appears concerned that Timothy’s ministry may be suffering because of his ongoing illness. Thus, Paul prescribes a course of action that would address and hopefully remedy Timothy’s digestive problem, yielding a measure of health to the young man.

I iterate: Paul is not advocating social drinking, he is advocating safe drinking. His instructions in this instance do not contradict what he provided earlier when he stated that an overseer must “not be a drunkard” [1 TIMOTHY 3:3] or as was stated that those chosen for the diaconate must “not [be] addicted to much wine” [1 TIMOTHY 3:8]. Because of the battle to be socially acceptable through approving of alcoholic beverage as accompaniment with a meal, note that Paul’s emphasis is on the curative use of wine rather than as a beverage for enjoyment.

What is apparent is that Paul’s advice is related to the overall picture of the need for the elder to maintain purity. Timothy would need to resist the temptation to succumb to the aesthetic teaching of the false teachers, and he would need to model balance in his walk before the people of God. Just so, the elder of the congregation in this day must be balanced and reasonable without compromising the Faith.

The elders are responsible to watch over the congregation. But what happens when the elders fail in their duty to be watchful? The congregation must act with dispatch in this instance. First, the people of God must prayerfully seek the mind of the Lord. Perhaps God is already acting to protect His flock and they need to give Him time to work out His will. Nevertheless, pleading for His intervention is always appropriate when error seems evident.

However, the people of God must bear in mind that the elder is a member of the assembly the same as they are members of the assembly. If those who are offended are responsible to approach the member who is offending, then it follows that the elder must be shown the same courtesy. When you are offended, go to the elder and tell him your concerns. If he refuses to listen, take two or three others with you. If he still refuses to hear the concerns, then refer the matter to the assembly. The congregation bears authority in the presence of the Lord.

Of course, this assumes you are a member of the congregation. Many hold themselves apart from uniting with the congregation though yet claiming the rights of membership. They are present, and perhaps even generally supportive of the work, but they have never invested their lives in the congregation through uniting with the assembly. In such instances, you may still appeal to the better nature of the elder. You have scant recourse, however, if you have held yourself apart from uniting with the assembly. Shouldn’t you make that decision to unite and thus invest your life in the cause of Christ?

How can I present the message without appeal to those who may have listened despite the fact that they have never placed faith in the Risen Son of God? Throughout our nation are many nice people, perhaps even church members, who somehow have never been born from above. Perhaps they have participated in the rites of the church, even professing their faith in the Son of God; however, they have never been born from above. Christ calls us to faith in Him, the Risen Lord of Glory. Until we have faith in Him, we are lost.

This is the message of life. Christ Jesus, the Son of God, was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life and gave Himself as an infinite sacrifice because of the sin of broken, fallen people. He was crucified because of our sin, but He conquered death, rising from the tomb. Now, the Word of God calls us saying, “If you openly agree with God that Jesus is Master, believing with your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be set free. It is with the heart that one believes and is made right with the Father, and with the mouth that one openly agrees with God resulting in freedom.” Paul concludes that portion of the Word by quoting the Prophet Joel, “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Master shall be set free” [see ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

Our prayer for each one listening this day is that they know this freedom that God promises in Christ Jesus our Lord. We urge each individual to believe this Good News and be saved. Do it today; do it now. Amen.