

Honor the Elder Office [Slide 1]  
1 Timothy 5:17-25

Alexander Strauch, in his book *Biblical Eldership*, tells the following story. Read card. It is important to select elders carefully.

My daughter Melanie told me the sad story of what happened to their former church in Nacogdoches. The two co-pastors had a new vision of the direction they felt the church should go that was not shared by the elders. After months of discussion and the inability to reach a mutual decision on the future direction of the church, the elders decided to fire the two pastors. This was not the unified decision by all of the elders but was pushed through by two of them. The indecision among the elders fueled divisions in the congregation.

In addition, the two pastors did not leave the area, but believing that God had called them to that city they began a new church in the same city with the result that many left the old church to join the new one, causing a further weakening of the church. Needless to say, the situation is quite a mess and God's work has suffered a setback.

If a church is going to move in an entirely new ministry direction or if you are going to do something so disruptive as to fire the pastors, you absolutely need a unified leadership team to make those kind of changes, and if you don't have unity in the leadership, you wait until you do. Their experience is a reminder of how critical to the health of a church is its top leadership, which is usually the elders. It is in a church's best interest that they honor the office of elder and the men who are willing to serve in that office and make sure they have solid elders.

The apostle Paul made sure Timothy understood the importance of honoring the office of elder and the men in it. Paul gave Timothy some clear directions on how to do that in our passage today. I invite you to turn to 1 Timothy 5:17-25. 1 Timothy is about three fourths of the way through the New Testament before you come to the big book of Hebrews. 1 Timothy 5:17-25. Today we will learn how to honor the office of elder and those who serve in it.

[Slide 2] Let's begin with verses 17-18. Read. The first thing Paul tells Timothy to do is to reward elders. Those elders who rule well should be given double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and in teaching. Double honor is primarily referring to monetary compensation. Honor here is being used in the same way as it was earlier in this chapter in verse 3 where Paul instructed Timothy to honor widows who are widows indeed, and then talked about putting them on the official church roll for financial support.

In verse 18 Paul refers to the OT law in Deuteronomy 25:4 where the law forbids the muzzling of oxen while they are treading out grain, and he also cites the words of Jesus in Luke 10:7 where Jesus says "The laborer is worthy of his hire."

I'm going to sidetrack for just a minute on verse 18 because of its significance to our understanding the nature of Scripture. This verse provides us early evidence that the New Testament books were already considered to be Scripture on the same level as the Old Testament. Paul begins verse 18 by saying, "The Scripture says," and then he quotes Deuteronomy 25:4 along with Luke 10:7, treating them both as equal Scripture.

The apostle Peter does something very similar in 2 Peter 3:15-16 where Peter includes Paul's letters in the same status as the rest of the Scriptures. I have listed those verses on your outline. Let's read them.

We see here in the New Testament itself, evidence that the New Testament books were already being classified as Scripture by the apostles and accepted as such by the church before

we even get out of the first century. That is important testimony because it would take a couple of centuries for all the New Testament books to be collected and bound together into one book, because everything had to be handwritten and then transported slowly. They didn't have the printing press and no instant communication.

Paul inadvertently affirms the canonicity and inspiration of the Gospel of Luke in this verse even though that is not his primary motivation in writing verse 18. In citing two different Scriptures Paul is making his point that those who labor in ministry should be compensated or rewarded for what they do. The ox was able to eat the grain it was threshing. It was able to materially benefit from its labor. The laborer was worthy to receive his wages. Therefore elders are worthy to be compensated for their labor and more so if they preach or teach God's word.

Typically these verses are applied to pastors like myself to justify paying us. That certainly is an application from these verses, but what about the rest of the elders? Shouldn't they receive some kind of compensation? The elders in our church and most elders have full-time jobs. They don't depend upon their elder work to meet their material needs. They are volunteers in the best sense of the word, but I read this passage and it says if they rule well they should be considered worthy of double honor or ample and generous provision.

I am not advocating a salary for elders and I am not speaking on my own behalf because not only do you pay me well but you provide me a Christmas gift and individuals from time to time give me gifts so I feel honored and appreciated. But I am thinking about the other elders. I don't think they get anything and Paul here says they are worthy of double honor. So, I think we can do better in honoring our elders: Walt Crews, John Davies, and Kerry Hughes, because they share the weight of leadership with me.

Let me make some suggestions. Invite an elder and his spouse out for a meal. You men who have boats, why don't you invite an elder the next time you go fishing? Ladies, the next time you bake a cake or a pie, how about doubling the recipe and making an extra one for one of the elders? If you have an extra ticket to a ball game, why don't you call one of the elders to go with you? I believe Paul is describing a culture of honor in verse 17 expressed in tangible ways. One key way we honor the office of elder and those who serve in it is by rewarding them.

[Slide 3] The second way we honor the office of elder and those who serve in it is by dealing with accusations justly. Look at verses 19-21. Read.

Those who serve in leadership can easily become the target of angry, disgruntled people. It is important then to entertain only accusations against elders that have multiple witnesses. In Matthew 18:15-16 where Jesus laid out the process for disciplining a sinning church member, he required two or three witnesses to verify the truthfulness of a claim. Jesus, in turn, was relying upon the OT Law in Deuteronomy 19:15 which required two or three witnesses to establish the truth of a matter. The witnesses had to agree in their testimony.

In modern times we have gained non-person witnesses. Photographs, audio or video recordings, written documents can also count as a witness, but the principle remains the same: don't accept a single accusation against an elder. Multiple witnesses must support the accusation before it can be treated seriously.

What do you do if the elder is found guilty of the accusation? We have an interpretive decision that rests on Greek grammar in verse 20. Literally, the text reads, "Those sinning rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also might have fear." "Those sinning" is a present participle and it could be understood in two slightly different ways. It could be understood simply in the sense of those sinning in contrast to those who are innocent. Or the present tense could emphasize ongoing action such as the NASB translates when it says "those who continue

to sin.” The difference is that Paul may be requiring only elders who refuse to repent to be publicly rebuked or Paul may require all guilty elders to be publicly rebuked even if they repent after the confrontation. The present tense participle would allow both options. If Paul had written with a past participle “those having sinned rebuke in the present of all,” then he would have clearly been saying that every guilty elder would need to be publicly confronted.

I think Paul’s intention was that every guilty elder be publicly confronted because the reason Paul gives for the public confrontation has nothing to do with the restoration or the punishment of the elder; it has everything to do with the well-being of the congregation. The purpose of the public rebuke is to promote fear of sinning in the rest of the congregation. If they see even an elder publicly rebuked for their sin, they are probably going to be less likely to commit that sin themselves.

One of the unforeseen values of church discipline is that it strengthens people’s resolve to resist sin. What do you think happened to the church in Jerusalem after God struck both Ananias and Sapphira dead for lying about how they handled the money from the sale of their property? Do you think people were quick to lie to the church leadership after that? Consider this example from Chuck Swindoll’s former church. Read Jack DeWolf illustration.

We’re not talking about minor sins here. A person does not normally bring an accusation against someone unless it is a significant sin that has potentially devastating consequences.

The major default position for most churches and most people is to err on the side of not doing anything or of covering up the sin and not publicly addressing it. Certainly the Roman Catholic Church damaged its reputation when people discovered that they often dealt with pedophile priests by simply moving them somewhere else rather than publicly disciplining them. I think all churches face the temptation to avoid public discipline because it is such an unpleasant business.

That is probably why in verse 21 Paul says that he solemnly charges Timothy in the presence of God and Christ Jesus and his angels to maintain these principles without bias and without partiality. Nothing like calling on God and Jesus and the whole angelic host as witnesses that Timothy needs to deal with sin among the elders and to do it without any bias or partiality.

The partiality could appear when you immediately dismiss the accusation as baseless without looking into it. The bias could appear when you readily investigate some elders but not others.

One little side note to verse 21, a technical note from the Greek grammar, that does not appear in your English translation. The definite article “the” appears before God, not before Christ Jesus, but appears again before the chosen angels. Grammatically what that does is equate God and Christ Jesus, but distinguishes them from the holy angels. This is a case where the grammar implies the equal deity of God the Father and Jesus, but denies equal deity to the angels.

When a church deals forthrightly with sin in the elders, you elevate the position of elder and actually inspire more confidence in them, because the congregation knows that if there is something wrong in the leadership, it will be addressed. The ultimate outcome of following this instruction is to increase the honor of the position. So, dealing justly with accusations against elders will bring honor to the office of elder.

[Slide 4] But of course, you’d rather not have to publicly rebuke an elder and the best way to avoid that is to make sure that you select elders carefully. Let’s read verses 22, 24 and 25 and we will come back to verse 23 later.

Laying hands on someone refers to the practice of publicly laying hands on someone to pray and to commission them for ministry. Laying on of hands is a way to publicly authorize someone for ministry. Paul says not to lay hands upon someone hastily because then you will

share in their sins or share responsibility for their sins. So if you approve of someone for ministry and place them in a position of influence and by implication encourage people to follow them and to listen to them, then when they sin grievously and negatively affect the body of Christ, you share responsibility for the mess they caused.

As I explained about a month ago when we talked about elder qualifications, our practice at Hope Fellowship is to have men lead in other areas of ministry before we consider them for an elder position, so typically we have had an opportunity to observe them lead and to watch their character before we consider them as an elder, often years of observation.

In verses 24-25 Paul further explains why you should have a significant period of assessment before the church chooses an elder. Sins and good deeds can either be hidden or open. Some men's sins are quite evident, but other men's sins can be hidden and only follow them or get revealed much later. The danger is that if you choose a man too soon he may have hidden sins that only show up after he becomes an elder. I could mention to you the names: Ted Haggard, Jim Baker, Jimmy Swaggert, and Gordon MacDonald and many of you would know who they are. They are all prominent church leaders whose hidden sins were brought to light forcing them at least for a while out of the ministry. Hidden sins eventually get found out.

Likewise, not all good deeds are public knowledge. You may overlook some good men because the quality of their life is not immediately obvious. Waiting also allows the cream to rise to the surface and become apparent. For all these reasons let a man be tested and observed over a long period of time before choosing him as an elder. Exercising care in choosing elders also honors the position.

[Slide 5] A fourth way to honor the position and the people in it is to show concern for them. Paul provides us an example of showing concern for Timothy in verse 23. Read verse.

This verse has been used to prove that drinking alcohol is not inherently sinful and that is certainly a valid application of this verse. Paul would not encourage Timothy to sin when he encourages him to drink a little wine for his stomach. Back then they had no water purification systems like we do, so alcohol is a cheap drink you can use that will not contain parasites and other nasty bugs in it.

However, Paul's goal is not to decide the religious dispute about whether Christians should drink or not. His goal is to express concern for Timothy and to encourage him to take care of himself and his health by using a medicinal remedy that was readily available. Earlier Paul had said that elders should not drink much wine. Perhaps Paul wanted to reassure Timothy that it was okay to drink some wine to help with his stomach problems.

At first glance verse 23 may seem out of place in this passage but it probably resulted from Paul thinking about how the elders needed to be treated in a way that honored them, and the thought came to him that caring for the elders' physical needs was part of honoring them, which then led him to think about Timothy's own physical need.

From time to time you may become aware of a physical need an elder has and you may have the opportunity to help with it. If you don't have that opportunity you can pray regularly for the elders that God will supply their needs. This too is a way to show honor to the position and the men who serve in it.

These are some ways to honor the elder office and those who serve in it. Reward the elders. Deal with accusations against them justly. Select them carefully and show concern for them.

In order to apply God's word this morning I have asked the elders to join me up front and I would like to ask some of you to come and pray for us.