

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth One Verse at a Time*

The Call to Lead the Church: Elders (Part 2)

INTRODUCTION

God has entrusted to spiritual leaders the sacred responsibility of caring for His people. Sadly, not all spiritual leaders are faithful to that task. The leaders at Ephesus and the leaders of Israel are examples of those who failed to lead in a godly way, and the results were tragic.

A. The False Leaders In Ephesus

When Paul left Ephesus for Macedonia, he left Timothy behind to deal with the various problems in the Ephesian church (1 Tim. 1:3) problems that were directly related to the failures of its leadership. Some of its leaders were teaching false doctrine and other things that weren't edifying (vv. 3-4). Some wanted to teach Jewish law without an adequate knowledge of its meaning (v. 7). Some women were trying to usurp the authority of the men (2:12). Some men were advocating celibacy, and abstinence from certain foods (4:3). Some of the leaders were sinful and in need of public rebuke (5:20), and some sought leadership out of pride or for financial gain (6:4-5).

Such problems illustrate the priority of selecting qualified leadership for the church. Whatever the leaders are, the people become. As Hosea said, "Like people, like priest" (4:9). Jesus Himself said, "Everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40, NASB). Biblical history demonstrates that people will seldom rise above the spiritual level of their leadership.

B. The False Leaders in Israel

1. Old Testament examples The Old Testament portrays Israel as an apostate nation. Israel's apostasy was directly related to the spiritual decline of its leadership.

a) Jeremiah 2:8

The Lord said, "The priests said not, Where is the Lord? And they that handle the law knew me not. The rulers also transgressed against me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal, and walked after things that do not profit."

The priests, rulers, and prophets were corrupt and the consequence was the apostasy of the entire nation.

b) Jeremiah 5:30-31

The Lord also said, "An appalling and horrible thing is committed in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means, and my people love to have it so; and what will ye do in the end of it all?" The people reveled in the deception and spiritual impotence of their leadership, but they reaped the inevitable judgment that follows such apostasy.

c) Jeremiah 8:8-12

Jeremiah said to the Jewish leaders, "How do ye say, We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us? Lo, certainly in vain he made it; the pen of the scribes is in vain. The wise men are ashamed; they are dismayed and taken. Lo, they have rejected the Word of the Lord; and what wisdom is in them?" (vv. 8-9). Although the leaders claimed wisdom and a commitment to the law of God, in reality the law was useless to them because they had rejected it.

The Lord then said, "Therefore will I give their wives unto others, and their fields to them that shall inherit them; for every one from the least even unto the greatest is given to covetousness, from the prophet even unto the priest every one dealeth falsely. For they have healed the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? Nay, they were not at all ashamed" (vv. 10-12). The prophets proclaimed a false peace, but failed to proclaim obedience to God.

d) Jeremiah 10:21

Jeremiah said, "The shepherds are become stupid, and have not sought the Lord; therefore they shall not prosper, and all their flocks shall be scattered." The failure of Israel's leaders brought tragic judgment upon the people.

e) Jeremiah 12:10

Jeremiah also said, "Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard, they have trampled my portion under foot, they have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness." God's people were victimized by false spiritual leaders.

f) Jeremiah 23:1-2, 4, 9, 11, 16

"Woe be unto the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the Lord. Therefore, thus saith the Lord God of Israel against the shepherds who feed my people, Ye have scattered my flock, and driven them away, and have not visited them; behold, I will visit on you the evil of your doings, saith the Lord. . . . I will set up shepherds over them who shall feed them. . . . Mine heart within me is broken because of the prophets. . . . Both prophet and priest are profane. . . . Hearken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you. They make you vain; they speak

a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the Lord." The failures of Israel's leadership had enormous implications for those who trusted and followed them.

2. New Testament examples

The Lord's indictment of Israel's leaders is not confined to the Old Testament.

a) Matthew 23:13-33

Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees, "Ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for ye neither go in yourselves, neither permit them that are entering to go in. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers; therefore, ye shall receive the greater damnation. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.

"Woe unto you, ye blind guides, who say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor! Ye fools and blind; for which is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is bound. Ye fools and blind; for which is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift? Whosoever, therefore, shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things on it. And whosoever shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth in it. And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him who sitteth on it.

"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy, and faith; these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. Ye blind guides, who strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel.

"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.

"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, and say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore, ye are witnesses against

yourselves, that ye are the sons of them who killed the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?"

b) Galatians 1:8-9

Paul pronounced a severe curse upon anyone who preached a false gospel.

c) Colossians 2:8, 18, 20-23

Paul warned his readers to avoid the false teachings of philosophy, mysticism, and asceticism.

d) 2 Peter 2:13, 17, 22

Peter described false teachers in graphic terms: as spots and blemishes (v. 13), wells without water (v. 17), dogs that return to their own vomit, and sows that return to wallow in the mire after being washed (v. 22; cf. Jude 12).

e) James 3:1

James warned of the serious retribution of God upon unfaithful teachers.

f) 1 John 2:18, 22

John referred to false teachers as "antichrists."

Spiritual leadership is a serious issue in the church. Those who betray that sacred trust incur severe judgment. Therefore careful consideration must be given to the calling and qualifications of anyone who expresses a desire to lead the church.

REVIEW

I. AN IMPORTANT CALLING (v. 1a)

II. A LIMITED CALLING (v. 1b)

III. A COMPELLING CALLING (v. 1c)

IV. A RESPONSIBLE CALLING (v. 1d)

V. A WORTHY CALLING (v. 1e)

A. According to Cotton Mather

The American Puritan minister Cotton Mather thought that the office of the Christian ministry, rightly understood, is the most honourable and important that any man could ever attain. To him one of the wonders of eternity will be reflecting on the wisdom and goodness of God in assigning that office to imperfect and guilty man (cf. Selections from Cotton Mather, Kenneth B. Murdock, ed. [N.Y.: Hafner, 1965], p. xi).

B. According to Will Sangster

Will Sangster, who preached in London's Westminster Hall during the time of World War II, wrote, "Called to preach! . . . Commissioned of God to teach the Word! A herald of the great King! A witness of the eternal gospel! Could any work be more high and holy? To this supreme task God sent His only begotten Son. In all the frustration and confusion of the times, is it possible to imagine a work comparable in importance with that of proclaiming the will of God to wayward men?" (The Craft of Sermon Construction [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1951], p. 24).

C. According to John Wycliffe

The fourteenth century preacher John Wycliffe lived at a period in history when priests were the spiritual leaders, but they were not allowing God's Word to be preached by lesser priests. Wycliffe's indictment of such priests in his *Contra Fratres* reveals his passion for the sacred task of preaching. Like Cotton Mather, he believed that the highest service that men may attain to on earth is preaching the Word of God.

Those men understood the worthiness of the ministry: it is a high and holy calling.

VI. A DEMANDING CALLING (v. 1f)

Ordination of Church Leaders

Ordination is the act whereby a church officially acknowledges the calling and qualifications of a man for ministry. Scripture delineates several aspects of ordination.

A. The Significance of Ordination

The Greek word translated "ordain" (*kathist[ma]emi*) is used many times in the New Testament. It means "to set aside" or "appoint." B. The Sign of Ordination

In the early church, the official sign of ordination was the laying on of hands. The apostles or others in spiritual leadership placed their hands on the individual being set apart for ministry. By doing so they affirmed their union with him, and in a sense transmitted their blessing to him. Timothy was ordained to the ministry by that process. Paul said to him, "Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery" (1 Tim. 4:14).

C. The Symbol of Ordination

The laying on of hands comes from an Old Testament symbol. When a Jewish person offered an animal sacrifice, he placed his hands on that sacrifice as an act of identification or union (F. F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: Acts* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], p. 130). The sacrifice was offered in his place for his sins so he identified with the offering in that way.

D. The Safeguards of Ordination

1. Careful evaluation

Paul warned Timothy, "Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thus share responsibility for the sins of others" (1 Tim. 5:22, NASB). Ordination is a very weighty responsibility. A sinful man has no right to be in the pastorate. When church leaders affirm by ordination that a man is called and qualified for the ministry, they are identifying with him in such an intimate way that if he sins, they are associated with his sin. Therefore ordination is not something that the leadership can afford to take lightly.

2. Prayerful consideration

Acts 20:28 says it's the Holy Spirit who appoints overseers; the church simply affirms His choices. Therefore the early church sought the will of God through prayer and fasting before they ordained man for the ministry (cf. Acts 13:2-3; 14:23).

E. The Sequence of Ordination

Ordination was first done by the apostles (cf. Acts 14:23). As the church grew and the apostles began to pass from the scene, ordination was done by apostolic representatives such as Titus (cf. Titus 1:5). As the church developed, ordination passed from the apostles to their representatives, and then to the leadership of each local church. Today the privilege and responsibility of ordination still rests with local church pastors and elders.

F. The Standard of Ordination

The man who desires the office of an overseer desires a good work (1 Tim. 3:1), but he should never be placed into church leadership on desire alone. It is the responsibility of the church to affirm his qualifications for ministry by measuring him against God's standard for leadership as delineated in 1 Timothy 3:2-7.

LESSON

The overarching characteristic of an elder is blamelessness.

I. THE PRIORITY OF BLAMELESSNESS

Paul said, "A bishop . . . must be blameless" (1 Tim. 3:2a). The Greek word translated "must" (dei) emphasizes an absolute necessity: blamelessness is absolutely necessary for an overseer. It is a basic, overall requirement. In fact, the other qualifications listed by Paul in verses 2b-7 define and illustrate what he means by blameless.

II. THE PARAMETERS OF BLAMELESSNESS

The Greek text indicates this is referring to a present state of blamelessness. It doesn't refer to sins that the man committed before or after he became a Christian unless such sins remain as a blight on his life. No one is blameless in that sense. The idea is that he has sustained a reputation for blamelessness.

III. THE DEFINITION OF BLAMELESSNESS

"Blameless" (v. 2) means "not able to be held." A blameless man cannot be taken hold of as if he were a criminal in need of detention for his actions. There's nothing to accuse him of. He is irreproachable.

IV. THE RATIONALE FOR BLAMELESSNESS

A. Modeling Christ's Character

A church leader's life must not be marred by sin or vice be it an attitude, habit, or incident. That's not to say he must be perfect, but there must not be any obvious defect in his character. He must be a model of godliness so he can legitimately call his congregation to follow his example (Phil. 3:17). They need to be confident that he won't lead them into sin.

A church leader becomes disqualified when there's a blight on his life that communicates to others that one can live in sin and still be a spiritual leader.

A Double Standard in the Ministry?

Spiritual leaders must be blameless because they set the example for the congregation to follow. That is a high standard, but it isn't a double standard. Since you are responsible to follow the example of your godly leaders (Heb. 13:7, 17), God requires blamelessness of you as well. The difference is that certain sins can disqualify church leaders for life, whereas that's not necessarily true for less prominent roles in the church. Nevertheless, God requires blamelessness of all believers (cf. Eph. 1:4; 5:27; Phil. 1:10; 2:15; Col. 1:22; 2 Pet. 3:14; Jude 24).

How about you? Is your life a worthy example for other believers to follow? Is the pursuit of blamelessness a priority for you?

B. Guarding Christ's Reputation

There are always malicious people looking for ways to discredit the reputation of Christ and His church. A sinful leader plays right into their hands, giving them an unparalleled opportunity to justify their lack of belief.

The standard for church leadership is blamelessness, not sinless perfection. There must be no ongoing sin in a leader's life because that would discredit his example and create an opportunity for malicious people to undermine Christianity.

Satan's Favorite Prey

It's not coincidental that many pastors fall into sin and disqualify themselves from ministry. Satan works very hard to undermine the integrity of spiritual leaders because in so doing, he destroys their ministries and brings reproach upon Christ. Therefore spiritual leaders must guard their thoughts and actions carefully, and congregations must pray earnestly for the strength of its leadership.

1. Spiritual leaders have a greater potential for temptation

I believe the Devil attacks spiritual leaders with more severe temptations than most Christians will ever experience. It stands to reason that those who lead the forces of truth and light against the kingdom of darkness will experience the strongest opposition from the enemy.

Satan directs the hottest heat of battle toward those who hold fast to God's Word who preach and teach it boldly without compromise. Faithful leaders are targets of the most subtle

insinuations, incessant solicitations, and most violent assaults of the enemy. Yet the grace and strength God gives is sufficient for the task. Out of the conflict comes victory that encourages greater effort and increases spiritual strength.

2. Spiritual leaders have a greater potential for malignment

Although the fall of any Christian is tragic, the devastation resulting from the fall of a pastor carries enormous implications because of the scope of his ministry. Such a fall would affect untold numbers of believers and non believers, and malign the faith.

Some people have malicious intent and look for the smallest fault in a leader so they can discredit his ministry. Consequently, leaders must be careful to maintain blamelessness so those watching their lives will not have the opportunity to make an accusation.

3. Spiritual leaders have a greater potential for chastening

A spiritual leader who sins is anything but insulated from God's chastening. Since he knows more, he is more accountable.

4. Spiritual leaders have a greater potential for hypocrisy

The sins of a spiritual leader are more hypocritical than the sins of others because it is his business to preach against sin.

There is a greater potential in the ministry for temptation, malignment, chastening, and hypocrisy. Consequently, spiritual leaders are likely to experience a higher level of spiritual conflict and require greater accountability, grace, and strength than other men. God is aware of that need and is gracious in undergirding his servants. And often that undergirding comes through the faithful prayers of a congregation on behalf of its leadership. So be sure to pray for your leaders.

Are You a Stained Glass Window?

An unholy pastor is like a stained glass window: a religious symbol that keeps the light out. That's why the initial qualification for spiritual leadership is blamelessness.

The seventeenth century Puritan Richard Baxter wrote, "Take heed to yourselves, lest you live in those sins which you preach against in others, and lest you be guilty of that which daily you condemn. Will you make it your work to magnify God, and, when you have done, dishonour Him as much as others? Will you proclaim Christ's governing power, and yet condemn it, and rebel yourselves? Will you preach his laws, and willfully break them?"

"If sin be evil, why do you live in it? if it be not, why do you dissuade men from it? If it be dangerous, how dare you venture on it? if it be not, why do you tell men so? If God's threatenings be true, why do you not fear them? if they be false, why do you needlessly trouble men with them, and put them into such frights without a cause?

"Do you 'know the judgment of God, that they who commit such things are worthy of death;' and yet will you do them? 'Thou that teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery,' or be drunk, or covetous, art thou such thyself? 'Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonorest thou God?' What! shall the same tongue speak evil that speakest against evil? Shall those lips censure, and slander, and backbite your neighbour, that cry down these and the like things in others?

"Take heed to yourselves, lest you cry down sin, and yet do not overcome it; lest, while you seek to bring it down in others, you bow to it, and become its slave yourselves: 'For of whom a man is overcome, the same he is brought into bondage.' 'To whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are whom you obey, whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness.' O brethren! it is easier to chide at sin, than to overcome it" (The Reformed Pastor [Carlisle, Penn.: Banner of Truth, 1956], pp. 67-68).

That is a good reminder: we must live what we preach. That's why Paul told Timothy to be sure that church leaders are blameless.

Baxter went on to say, "When your minds are in a holy heavenly frame, your people are likely to partake of the fruits of it. Your prayers and praises, and doctrine will be sweet and heavenly to them. They will likely feel when you have been much with God: that which is most on your hearts, is like to be most in their ears. . . .

"When I let my heart grow cold, my preaching is cold; and when it is confused, my preaching is confused; and so I can oft observe also in the best of my hearers, that when I have grown cold in preaching, they have grown cold too; and the next prayers which I have heard from them have been too like my preaching. . . .

"O brethren, watch therefore over your own hearts: keep out lusts and passions, and worldly inclinations: keep up the life of faith, and love, and zeal: be much at home, and be much with God. . . . Take heed to yourselves, lest your example contradict your doctrine . . . lest you unsay with your lives what you say with your tongues; and be the greatest hinderers of the success of your own labours. . . . One proud, surly, lordly word, one needless contention, one covetous action may cut the throat of many a sermon and blast the fruit of all that you have been doing" (pp. 61-63).

The ministry is a noble task, but it brings you into direct conflict with the enemy. Blamelessness is essential for spiritual credibility and victory.

V. THE GUARDIANS OF BLAMELESSNESS

How does a spiritual leader protect himself from the onslaughts of Satan? The answer is threefold: Scripture, prayer, and fellowship.

A. Scripture

The best way to be insulated from the attacks of the enemy is to be continually saturated with God's Word.

1. The purpose of studying Scripture

We must study God's Word with a pure motive so it can do its work in us. Only then will we be worthy vessels through whom the Spirit ministers.

David said, "Thy word have I hidden in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee" (Ps. 119:11). Being continuously exposed to the living Word guards us from sin and makes us pure (cf. John 15:3).

2. The peril of not studying Scripture

Tragically, many spiritual leaders allow themselves to be drawn away from God's Word. Perhaps the nature of their ministry doesn't require them to be studying the Word each day, so their lives aren't regularly exposed to its convicting truth. Or perhaps they have grown complacent in their commitment to the Word. If so, they have neglected the strength that comes as God's Spirit ministers through His Word, and have created a serious weakness in their spiritual armor.

B. Prayer

Prayer acknowledges our dependency on God for spiritual strength and victory. It is an admission that we need help.

C. Fellowship

In my spiritual battles I draw great strength and encouragement from those around me who are engaged in the same struggles. I thank God for them.

Conclusion

Spiritual leadership is not for everyone. The church must carefully evaluate all prospective leaders, and ordain only those who have a strong desire for ministry and who meet the qualification of blamelessness.

Focusing on the Facts

1. Why did Paul leave Timothy in Ephesus?
2. How do the words of Jesus in Luke 6:40 relate to the issue of qualified spiritual leadership?
3. How does Jeremiah 10:21 describe false leaders, and how did God judge them?
4. Upon whom did Jesus pronounce a series of woes in Matthew 23:13-33 and why?
5. How did Peter describe the false teachers of his day (2 Peter 2:13, 17, 22)?
6. What is ordination?
7. What is the significance of the laying on of hands in the ordination ceremony?
8. How can a church safeguard itself from ordaining the wrong men?
9. Who bears the responsibility for ordaining leadership in the church today?
10. Define "blameless".
11. Why must a church leader be a model of godliness (see pp. 11-12)?
12. Is God's standard for blamelessness in spiritual leadership a double standard? Explain.
13. Why are spiritual leaders more likely to experience greater spiritual conflict than other believers?
14. How can a congregation help strengthen its leaders?
15. What three things can a spiritual leader do to protect himself from Satan's attacks?

Pondering the Principles

1. We have seen the confusion and judgment that comes when people listen to false spiritual leaders. By way of contrast, read 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12, noting the commitment (vv. 1-2), character (vv. 3-8), conduct (vv. 9-11), and consuming passion (v. 12) of Paul and his associates. If you are a church leader, how does the quality of your ministry compare to theirs? Do your people sense a depth of commitment and compassion that is grounded in a deep love for God and His Word? Is it your goal to see your people living "in a manner worthy of the God who calls [them] into His own kingdom and glory" (v. 12, NASB)? Be diligent in the Word and prayer so that your ministry will be consistent with God's priorities and your heart will be tender towards His people.

2. Paul thanked the Philippian church for their expressions of love and support (Phil. 1:3 4; 4:10, 16-18), and encouraged them to pray for him (Phil. 1:19). Such a congregation is a source of strength and encouragement to any leader. Be faithful to "obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you" (Heb. 13:17). Take every opportunity to encourage those who minister to you and pray for them daily.

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