

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

The Call to Lead the Church: Elders (Part 3)

REVIEW

In 1 Timothy 3:1-7 the apostle Paul describes the call and characteristics of elders in the church. We have seen that an elder must be called by God . That call is initiated by the Holy Spirit, who places within him a strong desire to serve God in that capacity (v. 1).

In addition, we saw that an elder must be confirmed by the congregation as it examines the quality of his life. He must be blameless (v. 2a) above reproach and an example of godliness against which his people can measure the quality of their own lives. Blamelessness is the overarching characteristic of an elder.

Restoring Fallen Spiritual Leaders

Recently I was asked, "If a man sins when he's in the ministry and then repents, can he be forgiven and restored?" I replied, "Yes, of course God will forgive that person. He forgives every penitent sinner." However, that is a different issue from restoring fallen pastors to their former position of ministry.

Every time a fallen leader is placed back into ministry, the standard of virtue for spiritual leadership is lowered a little bit. That leads to a higher level of toleration for sinfulness in leaders. As people begin to perceive a lower standard of holiness in their leaders, they will probably lower the standard for their own lives as well.

Today, the church in America is experiencing an unprecedented volume of fallen pastors who are being restored to the ministry. I believe that phenomenon has brought a corresponding decline in our perception of what it means to be a godly leader.

While I rejoice to see a fallen brother restored to the love and fellowship of the church, I am deeply concerned about the current trend toward a greater toleration of the sins of spiritual leaders. God's standard for leadership is under attack, but don't forget that the life of a spiritual leader must be blameless and worthy of imitation.

LESSON

In 1 Timothy 2b-7 Paul delineates four areas of life in which an elder must be blameless: his moral character, home life, spiritual maturity, and public reputation.

Paul describes each of those characteristics in the present tense. They must be present in the life of every elder, yet they're also to reflect his past life. There must be no sin in his recent past that diminishes his present leadership example. Those who know him must perceive him as blameless in character.

That is a high standard, but that's because God calls all believers to be holy like Him (1 Pet. 1:16). Therefore those who lead His people must maintain the highest possible standard for the sake of their example to the church. And the church must never compromise its standard of leadership.

I. AN ELDER MUST BE BLAMELESS IN HIS MORAL CHARACTER (vv. 2b-3)

"A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober minded, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy of filthy lucre, but patient, not a brawler, not covetous."

A. "The Husband of one Wife" Sexually Pure (v. 2b)

1. A preferred translation

"The husband of one wife" is not the best rendering according to my studies of the Greek text. I believe the words translated "wife" (*gunaikos*) and "husband" (*an[ma]er*) are better translated "woman" and "man."

The Greek construction places emphasis on the word "one," thereby communicating the idea of a one woman man. Additionally, the absence of a definite article ("The husband of one wife") stresses character, not marital circumstances: the character of an elder must reflect fidelity to one woman.

2. A prevalent temptation

It is appropriate that sexual fidelity is first on Paul's list of moral qualifications because that seems to be the area that most often disqualifies a man from ministry. It is therefore a matter of grave concern.

3. The proposed interpretations

a) That an elder can't be a polygamist

The view that an elder can't have more than one wife at a time has been the traditional understanding of the English phrase "the husband of one wife," but the religious and cultural climate of Paul's day make it unlikely that he was referring to polygamy.

(1) Jewish intolerance of polygamy

Although some Jewish people practiced polygamy (William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], p. 76), it was forbidden by Jewish law, and was not a major issue in first century Judaism.

(2) Roman tolerance of promiscuity

Polygamy wasn't a major issue among the Romans. Divorce, concubines, and prostitutes were so prevalent that they didn't bother with polygamist marriages.

Divorce was so rampant that it wasn't unheard of for a woman to get married for the twenty-seventh time and be the twenty sixth wife of her husband to be! The first century [sc] A. D. Roman satirical poet Juvenal ridiculed women for wearing out their bridal veils with so many weddings (*Woman: A Satire* [N.Y.: Rarity Press, 1932]).

Those factors make it unlikely that Paul had polygamy in mind in this passage.

b) That an elder can't marry a second time

Some people say that "a one woman man" means that a man can't be an elder if he has remarried for any reason. But even if we use the translation "the husband of one wife" instead, Paul can't be referring to remarriage because God permits remarriage under certain conditions.

(1) 1 Timothy 5:9-15 "Let not a widow be taken into the number under sixty years old, having been the wife of one man, well reported of for good works, if she hath brought up children, if she hath lodged strangers, if she hath washed the saints' feet, if she hath relieved the afflicted, if she hath diligently followed every good work. But the younger widows refuse; for when they have begun to grow wanton against Christ, they will marry, having condemnation, because they have cast off their first faith."

"The number" refers to a select group of godly, virtuous widows over sixty years of age who had made a vow of consecration to a specific aspect of ministry. Apparently it that required them to remain single to focus all their energies on that ministry. In return, they were cared for by the church.

Younger widows were prohibited from joining that group for fear that their natural desire for a husband might cause them to break their vow, thereby incurring judgment. Verse 15 says that some of those young women had "already turned aside after Satan" apparently by committing sexual sins.

Paul commanded those younger widows to "marry, bear children, [and] rule the house" (v. 14). God honors a second marriage in the case of young widows.

(2) Romans 7:2-3 "The woman who hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law [that bound her to] her husband. So, then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man."

With the death of a marriage partner, the surviving partner is free to remarry. In fact, it's a wonderful option.

(3) 1 Corinthians 7:39 "The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth, but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will, only in the Lord." The only qualifier given for the remarriage of a widow is that she marry a Christian. Although Paul used widows for his illustration, the same principle applies to widowers.

Since God honors remarriage after the death of a spouse, Paul could not have been prohibiting all remarried men from serving as elders in 1 Timothy 3:2.

c) That an elder can't be divorced

Some people say that Paul was prohibiting divorced men from serving as elders. But if Paul were referring to divorce, he could have clarified the issue by saying "An elder must be a man who has never been divorced." But even that statement would pose problems because the Bible teaches that remarriage after a divorce is within God's will under two circumstances.

(1) Divorce is acceptable when one partner commits continuous sexual sin.

Jesus said to some the leaders, "It hath been said [by your rabbinical tradition], Whosoever shall [divorce] his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement" (Matt. 5:31). Many Jewish men were divorcing their wives for insignificant reasons, and the only requirement was to complete the necessary paper work.

But Jesus said, "Whoever shall [divorce] his wife, except for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery [when she remarries]; and whosoever shall marry that is divorced committeth adultery" (Matt. 5:32). Implied in that statement is that those who have divorced for reasons other than fornication are themselves adulterers, and their new wives are adulteresses. I believe that the "fornication" mentioned in that context refers to extreme situations of unrelenting and unrepentant sexual sin. God graciously permits the innocent party to be free from bondage to such an evil partner.

With that freedom comes the freedom to remarry a believer.

Under old Testament law, if a marriage partner committed adultery, he or she could be stoned to death. That would release the other partner from that marriage and free him or her to remarry. Although God no longer demands the death of an unfaithful spouse, the sin of adultery is no less severe. Should God's grace in sparing the life of the adulterer penalize the innocent party by demanding lifelong singleness? I don't think so. The grace that spares the adulterer's life also frees the innocent party to remarry.

(2) Divorce is acceptable when an unbelieving partner leaves

In 1 Corinthians 7:15 Paul says, "If the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases; but God hath called us to peace." If an unbelieving partner wants out of the marriage, the believer is free to let him or her go. God doesn't require you to live in a state of war with such a partner.

God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16) but is gracious to the innocent party when one partner commits continuous sexual sin, or when an unbelieving partner leaves. In either case the innocent party is free to remarry.

Who Can Remarry? Some people believe that remarriage under practically any circumstances is sinful, but that is not what the Bible teaches. Paul gives additional insight into that issue in 1 Corinthians 7, where he delineates three groups of single people.

1. Virgins (vv. 25, 28, 34, 36-37)

A virgin is a single person who has never been married or had a sexual relationship. Such a person is free to marry a believer whenever he or she chooses.

2. Widows (v. 8)

A widow is a formerly married person who has been left single by the death of a spouse. As we have seen, such a person is free to remarry .

3. The unmarried (vv. 8, 11, 32)

Their identity

The identity of the "unmarried" group is an important issue with regard to Paul's teaching on remarriage.

In verse 34 Paul makes a distinction between the "unmarried" and the "virgins": "The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord" (NASB). In verse 8 Paul makes a distinction between the "unmarried" and the "widows": "I say, therefore, to the unmarried and widows." In verses 10-11 Paul says, "Unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband; but and if she depart, let her remain unmarried" (emphasis added). The unmarried, therefore are those who were formerly married but are now single by divorce.

Their right to remarry

Paul said, "It is good for them [virgins, widows, and divorced people] if they abide even as I" (v. 8). It's good to stay single because you can give your undivided attention to pleasing the Lord (vv.32-33). However in verse 9 he says, "If they cannot have self control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn." If you're a virgin, a widow, or a formerly married person now divorced, it is better to remarry than endure the constant desire for a mate.

Remarriage is clearly not a sin when it occurs under specific biblical parameters. We have seen that those parameters involve the person who has been widowed, the innocent victim of an unrepentant adulterer, or someone who's been abandoned by an unbelieving spouse.

d) That an elder can't be single

Some people say 1 Timothy 3:2 prohibits single men from serving as elders. But that position is refuted by the fact that Paul, who was an elder (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6), was himself single (1 Cor. 7:7-9).

e) That an elder must be devoted to only one woman

Paul was not referring to an elder's marital status because that is not a moral qualification for spiritual leadership. However, if the elder is married, he is to be a one woman man.

Unfortunately it's possible to be married to one woman yet not be a one woman man. Jesus said, "Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matt. 5:28). A married or unmarried man who lusts after many women is unfit for the ministry. An elder must love, desire, and think only of the wife that God has given him.

Sexual purity is a major issue in the ministry. That's why Paul placed it at the top of his list.

B. "Temperate" Not Given to Excess (v. 2c)

1. Its definition

The Greek word translated "temperate" ($\eta\mu\alpha\epsilon\phi\alpha\lambda\iota\omicron\varsigma$) means "without wine" or "unmixed with wine." It speaks of sobriety the opposite of intoxication (P. J. Budd, " $\eta\mu\alpha\epsilon\phi\alpha\lambda\iota\omicron\varsigma$," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, edited by Colin Brown [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979], 1:514-15).

2. Its two fold usage

Its verb form (Gk., $\eta\mu\alpha\epsilon\phi\omega$) was used in a literal and figurative sense in both Hellenistic and New Testament Greek.

a) In the literal sense

If Paul had the literal sense of $\eta\mu\alpha\epsilon\phi\omega$ in mind, he was requiring elders to abstain from any form of intoxication. Drunkenness was a serious problem in Ephesus, which is where Timothy was having problems with the elders. That was due in part to the drunken orgies associated with the pagan religious practices at the temple of Diana. The elders were to remain separate from such evil influences and set an example of sobriety for others to follow (Eph. 5:18).

The Mockery of Strong Drink

Wine was a common drink in biblical times. Because Palestine was so hot and dry, it was often necessary to consume a large volume of wine to replenish body fluids lost in the heat. To help avoid drunkenness, wine was normally mixed with large amounts of water. Even so, the lack of refrigeration and the fermentative properties of wine made intoxication a problem.

Even though wine can cheer a person's heart (Judg. 9:13), and was beneficial for medicinal purposes such as stomach ailments (1 Tim. 5:23) and relieving pain for those near death (Prov. 31:6), its abuse was common. That's why Proverbs 20:1 says, "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging, and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise."

1. According to Proverbs 23

Verses 29-35 say, "Who hath woe? Who hath sorrow? Who hath contentions? Who hath babbling? Who hath wounds without cause? Who hath redness of eyes? They that tarry long at the wine; they that go to seek mixed wine. Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth its color in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. At the last it biteth like a serpent, it stingeth like an adder. Thine eyes shall behold strange things, thine heart shall utter perverse things. Yea, thou shalt be as he that lieth down in the midst of the sea, or as he that lieth upon the top of a mast. They have stricken me, shalt thou say, and I was not sick; they have beaten me, and I felt it not. When shall I awake? I will

seek it yet again."

2. According to Genesis 9

Verses 20-23 record an example of the mocking affect of wine. Noah planted a vineyard, made wine, and became drunk. While he was drunk "he was uncovered within his tent" (v. 21). The Hebrew text implies some kind of sexual evil. Ham, one of his sons, saw him in that state and mocked him. His two other sons entered the tent backwards to cover him up because they were ashamed of his sinfulness.

3. According to 2 Samuel 13 Verses 28-29 tell us that David's son Absalom had Amnon, his halfbrother, slain while Amnon was "merry with wine."

Because of their position, example, and influence certain Jewish leaders abstained from wine. Priests could not enter God's house while under its influence (Lev. 10:9). Kings were also advised not to consume wine because it might hinder their judgment (Prov. 31:4-5). The Nazarite vow, the highest vow of spiritual commitment in the old Testament, forbade its participants from drinking wine (Num. 6:3).

In the same way, spiritual leaders today must avoid intoxication so they might exercise responsible judgment and set an example of Spirit-controlled behavior.

b) In the figurative usage

It's likely that Paul's usage of *n[ma]ep[h[ma]o* went beyond the literal sense of avoiding intoxication to the figurative sense of being alert and watchful. An elder must deny any excess in life that diminishes clear thinking and sound judgment.

Commentator William Hendriksen said, "Such a person lives deeply. His pleasures are not primarily those of the senses, like the pleasures of a drunkard for instance, but those of the soul. He is filled with spiritual and moral earnestness. He is not given to excess (in the use of wine, etc.), but moderate, well-balanced, calm, careful, steady, and sane. This pertains to his physical, moral, and mental tastes and habits" (Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], p. 122).

Drinking is only one area in which excess can occur. overeating has been called the preacher's sin, and often that's a just criticism. But spiritual leaders are to be moderate and balanced in every area of life.

The first moral characteristic God requires of an elder is sexual purity, most frequently displayed by devotion to one woman. That's a mark of true virtue, especially in a society where pornography and other forms of sexual promiscuity are proliferated through books, magazines, television, movies, and

music. Second, God requires an elder to be clearheaded, which means avoiding the many excesses of our society. He must maintain a balanced, alert, and watchful life.

When a church considers a young man for the ministry, it must avoid the temptation of focusing on his personality and speaking ability while neglecting the weightier matters of his calling and character. God's standards for spiritual leaders are high, but if the church dismisses or lowers those standards, it will suffer because its people will settle into a lower standard for their lives as well.

Rather than lowering the standard, I pray that God will raise up leaders of godly character that His church might be all He wants it to be for His glory.

Focusing on the Facts

1. Don't forget that the life of a spiritual leader must be _____ and worthy of _____ .
2. In what four areas of life is an elder to be blameless?
3. What is a preferred translation of the phrase "the husband of one wife" (v. 2b)?
4. Why is sexual purity first on Paul's list of elder qualifications?
5. Why is it unlikely that Paul had polygamy in mind in 1 Timothy 2b?
6. What are five interpretive options for the phrase "the husband of one wife" (v. 2b)? 7. How did Jewish law view polygamy?
8. What elements in Roman culture overshadowed polygamy?
9. What does "the number" refer to in 1 Timothy 5:9 (see p. 5)?
10. What was Paul's command to younger widows in 1 Timothy 5:14 and why?
11. Under what conditions does God permit the remarriage of a divorced person?
12. Who are the "unmarried" in 1 Corinthians 7:8, 11, 32?
13. How do we know that Paul didn't prohibit single men from serving as elders?
14. Is it possible to be married to one woman for life yet not be a one-woman man? Explain.

15. Define "temperate" (v. 2c).
16. Explain the literal sense in which "temperate" was used.
17. How does Proverbs 23:29-35 characterize one who is addicted to wine?
18. Explain the figurative sense in which "temperate" was used.

Pondering the Principles

1. Review the section entitled "Restoring Fallen Spiritual Leaders" (see pp. 1-2). Perhaps you or someone you know has experienced the confusion and disillusionment that results from the fall of a spiritual leader. What should your attitude be toward that leader (see Gal. 6:1)? Even though many have failed God's standard for leaders, never use such failures to justify lowering your standard of obedience. You must continue to obey the Lord, knowing that He will purge and refine His leaders.
2. What has this chapter taught you about the importance of fidelity within a marriage relationship? How can you maintain purity in that area when our society is so unrelenting in its attacks against biblical standards of morality? Read Psalm 119:9-16, 97-105. How did the psalmist keep his heart pure? From those passages make a list of things you can do to guard your heart from impurity, and prayerfully begin to put them into practice.
3. The Bible has much to say about the destructive nature of excessive wine, but what about drinking in moderation? Scripture is silent on the matter, so you need to answer that question for yourself. To help you think through the issue, reflect on your answers to these questions:
 - Why do I want to drink wine (or any alcoholic beverage)?
 - Is drinking wine necessary?
 - Is drinking wine the best choice?
 - Is drinking wine habit forming?
 - Is drinking wine potentially destructive?
 - Is my drinking wine offensive to other Christians?
 - Will drinking wine harm my Christian testimony?
 - Am I absolutely certain drinking wine is right?
 - Do I want others to follow my example?

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