

Wise Counsel for Preachers and Ordinations

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Dear Friends,

Our study passage this week deals with rather specific attitudes toward ministers. Unwise ordinations and low regard for men in ministry cause severe problems for a church. If a church calls for a man's ordination to an office for which he is not qualified, they commit two wrongs. They put the man into an office for which he is not qualified, and which he cannot, therefore, fulfill with honor either to himself or to his Lord. Secondly, they rob the man of opportunity to function effectively and profitably in the true office to which God has appointed him.

Increasingly with time, I believe that a man who seeks the office and appears to have the potential for ministry should be allowed to grow and mature for a rather long period of time under the mentoring of an older minister. "Let these things first be proved" requires that the man demonstrate the evidence both of his calling from God and his maturity in the faith prior to his ordination. Once ordained, I believe that every man should make his calling the first priority of his life and that he should never compromise his conduct or qualifications so as to bring dishonor to his position. A man who knowingly compromises his qualifications discredits both his own ministry and the respect that people who know him hold for other ministers. I fear that this willingness to compromise is to some degree responsible for the low respect that many churches have for ministers. Two dimensions exist for such compromise. A church that wants to ordain a man whose qualifications have not been demonstrated might decide that the New Testament qualifications really don't apply to us today. I have actually heard people in this situation state, "Well, if we wait till we have someone who meets all these qualifications, we'll never ordain anyone." This faulty attitude rejects Scripture and replaces Biblical criteria with relativism. Likewise, a man in ministry who realizes in any particular facet of his qualifications for office that he fails, might rationalize his failure with "I tried, but I just couldn't live up to it, so I decided to give up trying." According to the Biblical requirements of church office, a church must require evidence of full qualifications prior to ordination, and a man who has been ordained must uncompromisingly apply all the Biblical qualifications of the office to his personal life and conduct.

Why would anyone lay an accusation against an "elder"? If he is guilty, they should make the charge with demonstration of the irrefutable evidence of his failure. If there is no evidence, the charge should never be made. At the heart of such accusations, I fear, is a deep lack of Biblical respect for both the office and for the men who occupy the office. We live in an era that has seen numerous men in highly visible ministries fall into disgrace. The secular news media is always ready to jump onto such episodes and point out the pervasive hypocrisy of conservative, Bible-believing Christianity. Much of this low regard has seeped into the minds of many Christians.

How can we avoid such traps in our own churches and ministries? I recall hearing a radio broadcast shortly after one of these public failures. Chuck Swindoll was at the time pastor of the Evangelical Free Church in Fullerton, California. He actually broadcast a private session that he had with his ministerial staff at that church. He emphasized a strong posture of personal accountability between every member of the staff at that church. He pleaded with his staff that, if ever they observed him falling short of his office, they would immediately confront him. I believe in this approach he hit at the heart of many ministerial failures, both public and private. The minister who becomes private and isolates himself is setting himself up for certain failure. The minister who becomes unwilling to graciously accept confrontation and correction from people in the church becomes a prime target of Satan. Unity doesn't mean that we live in an artificial world where we pretend that everyone, especially we individually, are flawless. Unity means that we care enough to confront error when it appears. Confront it graciously, but confront it consistently. Unity also means that we must be willing to receive confrontation without

taking offense at the person who confronts us.

I believe a healthy church culture that is willing to confront—and be confronted—safely is essential for a healthy respect for the ministry within the church. I do not require or expect that every confrontation be perfect. Such a thing doesn't exist. Both the person who confronts me and I are equally flawed with sin and need a healthy dose of grace to respond graciously, whether confronting or confronted.

Often a minister must confront less-than-perfect conduct in his sermon. How does he confront them? How do people in the congregation respond? He needs as much grace to confront error properly as they need to repent properly. 2Ti 2:24-26 instructs the pulpit and the pew alike to apply grace and tenderness in our interactions with each other. I may not always agree with the person who confronts me when I fail, or when that person perceives that I failed. How I respond as a minister to this situation will set an example that others in the church will observe and practice. Many times I have faced gentle correction by caring members of the congregation, something that I profoundly appreciated. And, yes, at times I have been confronted in rather hostile ways that did not rub me well. In those cases I am under just as much Biblical obligation to respond with grace as when I deserved it. It is by no means easy to respond with grace when you feel that you have been wrongly rebuked, but the example of ministry in these occasions will go far to move a church toward godly and always gracious exhortation.

Despite the incredible difficulty of working my way through some of these passages and their application to my life and the lives of the people in the church that I serve, I am grateful that the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write such instructive and practical—at times in my face—words to that young preacher Timothy. Will you pray for me that I will have the tender grace to demonstrate a godly example that models the grace that Paul exemplified in his teaching, and that my personal conduct will foster respect toward the office of ministry and not contempt or low regard for it? I truly ask and need your prayers to this end.

God bless, Joe Holder

Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses. Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear. I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality. Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins: keep thyself pure. Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities.? Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after. Likewise also the good works of some are manifest beforehand; and they that are otherwise cannot be hid. {1Ti 5:19-25}

I have chosen to treat all of these verses as a single thematic unit. The context seems to urge this perspective. After urging the church's support for its ministry, Paul cautions them to hold ministers in high regard. These men inherently hold a prominent place, a situation that often leads to undue criticism against them. The juiciest gossip of the day focuses on a preacher who made a mistake that dishonored his ministry. Even Christians are prone to this ungodly gossip.

Paul's rule that begins this lesson would immediately curb most of the dissension and unrest that occurs in churches. If someone raises a charge or wants to pass along a "secret" about a minister, we should immediately stop the person in their tracks. "What proof do you have? What value can you offer that justifies your telling me or anyone else about this allegation? What if it proves to be a false charge?" If a person cannot produce personal witnesses and justify the need to discuss the matter with you, they should be stopped immediately from further discussion. If we listen to gossip, we must accept a measure of blame for its damage.

In a balanced measure that deals realistically with the question of ministers who are indeed human and

occasionally do err, Paul adds a further directive. When witnesses confirm a preacher's error, it should be confronted in the public assembly of the church. The man should be publicly rebuked and urged to repent. Further the church should work intently to help this man recover from his error, not merely sit in judgment and gossip about his conduct. The whole church becomes a tool in helping the man regain his integrity and his ministry. It appears that Paul views public rebuke as a necessary step in the recovery process for fallen ministers, perhaps so for all believers.

The treatment toward falsely accused or erring ministers is to be equally applied to all. You don't forgive an egregious sin because the man who sinned is a favored friend. Nor do you apply excessive harshness to a man because you and he haven't gotten along in the past.

Although the text cannot clearly affirm the point, some commentaries (The Bible Knowledge Commentary as an example) make 1Ti 5:23 parenthetical to Paul's ongoing dialogue regarding the church's administration of spiritual gifts, including, but not limited to their ordination. The flow of information would indicate the possibility. How does Timothy's taking a measured amount of wine for his health relate to the qualifications and ordination of other men?

{1Ti 5:22} "Lay hands suddenly on no man..." appears to refer to ordination. Occasionally writers will apply the verse to whether we receive a charge against a minister or not. This view, correct whether or not it presents the primary lesson, holds that we should give the benefit of the doubt to a minister who comes under accusation till we know by hard evidence and witnesses that he has erred. Given the greater context, it is my view that Paul is referring to the practice of laying hands on a man to ordain him to office, either minister or deacon. Sudden or hasty ordinations occur without sufficient evidence and time to observe the man in a variety of situations to truly reach any valid conclusion as to his calling and qualifications. I do not favor speedy ordinations.

It appears that the "Some men's sins are open beforehand..." idea that follows this warning against speedy ordinations relates directly to Paul's caution. Why avoid quick ordination? The reason is obvious. Due to personality and to the variety of circumstances that surface over time, it is necessary for preachers and the church of the man's membership to observe him for a lengthy time before considering him for ordination. Some men seem to live open lives regardless of their situation. If they make a mistake, they make it for all to see. It is open immediately, so that people know it for better or worse. Other men are by nature more private. They may make the same mistake, but do so in a manner that does not reveal the error until much later. Allow time to pass, and both men's conduct will become apparent. However, due to one man's temperament, if we were inclined toward hasty ordinations, we might ordain one man right away and hesitate to ordain the other man for years. Both men commit the same infraction, but one does so in a more obvious and public manner than the other. The church's judgment should not be administered so as to leave it open to such inconsistencies. "And let these also first be proved" {1Ti 3:10} should be the habit of a church toward anyone considered for ordination.

The wisdom of Paul's caution here should be obvious. What if a church makes a mistake in calling for a man's ordination to either office? How do you "un-ordain" a man? You might as well try to un-scramble an egg. The personal wounds to the man and his family are devastating. It is far wiser to proceed with gentle caution in such matters.

How long should a church expect a man to speak and function in ministry under the pastor's mentoring before considering him for ordination? We should judge each case on its merits, not try to follow a prescribed program or timeline. One thing seems certain from Paul's Pastoral letters; do not be hasty in ordination.

Various pastors and churches follow different procedures in their efforts to apply Paul's instructions to our contemporary church setting. I know of at least one respected pastor who will not consider ordaining a man to the ministry, regardless of how effective he is in the pulpit, till a church calls him as

its pastor. This is a sensible practice. I am inclined to view it as a worthy habit in our time and culture.

A general practice that our churches follow is for a man to visit various churches in the region where he lives so that several pastors have opportunity to hear him speak and to observe his demeanor with other believers. Although the actual decision to call for a man's ordination should be the church of his membership, they should do so advisedly and only with the concurrence of surrounding churches that have had occasion to hear the man speak and to see his conduct firsthand.

How many ministers should an individual church ordain or have in its membership? It seems reasonably clear that most of the New Testament churches had more than one minister laboring among them. However, it also seems clear that only one man is to serve as the pastor of a church. The New Testament knows nothing of "pastoring by committee," nor should it. Depending on a church's membership, a variety of preachers might serve various needs and encourage the membership more than a single pastor is capable of doing. I reject "co-pastor" or "associate pastor" concepts as encroaching on the pastoral responsibility of the pastor whom God has called and assigned to a local church.

In the case of deacons, an office that does not grow out of a divine "calling," but rather is based on the individual church's need, the matter seems more reasonably left to the church of the man's membership. How many deacons does a church need? In most cases they may not need as many as they want to ordain. We can make a reasonable case that the Jerusalem church numbered close to ten thousand members when the apostles ordained seven men as deacons. {Ac 6} The number depends on the individual church's need. What activities need the attention and wisdom of a qualified deacon? How many deacons are needed to ensure that these needs are met? In most churches two to three deacons is more than sufficient.

One need only experience one or two unwise ordinations and the aftermath that they inevitably create to realize the incredible wisdom that Paul displayed in this chapter. The honor of ministry in this lesson grows out of the man's conduct, not out of a piece of paper given to him at ordination. A church should follow wise judgment in ordinations. May we practice Paul's godly counsel with gentle grace and spiritual discernment. The mentoring process described in 2Ti 2:2 requires time and patience to grow strong, godly leaders. We should exercise caution in selecting the men whom we ordain, and we should expect exemplary conduct from them after their ordination. These thoughts seem almost elementary, but they are essential to a church's wise administration of the ministry that God sends to it. Be cautious in selecting the men to be ordained, and expect—demand—that they honor their position after ordination.

Elder Joe Holder