

## **Ecclesiastical Government (13<sup>th</sup>)**

(The study for today continues looking at the officers in the congregation that the Lord Jesus Christ appointed and their particular function. This session continues studying the word for elder and his relationship within the assembly.)

We closed our last podcast while studying the function of elder in I Timothy 5:17 and the following verses. The context of the epistle must include the passage in Acts chapter twenty since the information given to Timothy was for the congregation at Ephesus. Though Timothy did not have “the care of all the churches” as Paul did as an apostle (II Corinthians 11:28), he, like all faithful men, was concerned for the congregation wherein he was laboring, as well as all other congregations, especially those of which he knew. We saw in previous lessons that the congregation was to be knowledgeable not only of the qualifications of the men they appointed to be their leader, but how they were to be honored and respected as they faithfully fulfilled their office. From this passage (I Timothy 5:17ff.), we discovered that the congregation is to (1) give honor to them; (2) give double honor to those that labor well; (3) not to listen to gossip and false accusations against them without substantial proof; (4) publicly rebuke those who live sinfully; and, (5) not to quickly ordain one to the ministry. Again, I remind you that these instructions were not given to a ruling body apart from or over the congregation; they were given to the assembly—the house of God. In our last broadcast we discussed: (1) to give honor to them; (2) to give double honor to those that labor well.

Let us now consider number three: not to listen to gossip and false accusations against them without substantial proof. Ministers live in glass houses. Not only does the world seek any opportunity to expose and denigrate the office of the ministry, and especially defame a faithful minister, but often people within the congregation search for opportunities to vilify a faithful man of God. Yes, there are false ministers as well as false professors of Christians. This is not new. In the early days of Christianity, Paul spoke of such who were “false apostles, deceitful workers,” “dogs,” “evil workers,” and “the concision” (II Corinthians 11:13; Philippians 3:2), just to name a few. Therefore, it is no wonder that there are such people seeking and attaining positions of authority within organized religion today. What is amazing is that it appears that modern professors of Christianity gravitate toward such impostors and professional entertainers more than to faithful ministers who live a godly lifestyle and proclaim the truth of the Scriptures. It is faithful ministers that are under consideration in our text, though the principle of not accepting gossip and incriminations against anyone without proper witnesses is a good practice in every circumstance.

The lives of many people, especially ministers, have been greatly wounded, if not destroyed, due to the spreading of rumors that often were misleading and sometimes totally false. I Timothy 5:19 says, “Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses.” The Greek word for “accusation” derived from the Greek word for a complaint at law, and the word for accusation is used for the one who brings the accusation. Oddly, our English word “category” comes from this word. See Luke 6:7; John 18:29; and, Titus 1:6 for the other uses of this Greek word. Titus 1:6 is apropos since it is also associated with the eldership in that he is to have “faithful children not accused of riot or unruly.” In other words, an accusation is not merely some imaginary view or some objectionable opinion that someone has against the minister. It must be a “lawful charge” against him as the scribes and Pharisees sought against the Lord Jesus Christ, Luke 6:7. Therefore, if a lawfully charge of a sin is presented before the congregation, there must be two or three witnesses of the sin for proof of the iniquity committed. This is in harmony with that of any other member as taught by the Lord Jesus. See Matthew 18:15-20. If such were truly practiced today there would be more unity and harmony in the congregation.

This reminds me of a practice by an older minister as he related it to me several years ago. His practice was when he went to a new congregation he would tell the congregation at the beginning that if someone came to him and said something to him about another member he would immediately take that individual with him to the person in question to discuss the matter. Upon such an occasion, the accuser would generally back down and the whole matter was dropped. I asked him how often something of that nature occurred. He said it only happened once because when the news got around to the other members that he meant what he said they didn't approach him with such gossip and allegations. I have found this to be profitable throughout my own ministry. However, too often we listen to things and become engaged in degrading conversation against someone (especially if it is a person that we don't particularly care for) and corrupt communications proceed out of our mouths. Instead, we should cut off such discussions and only speak of good things that promote, edify, and minister grace to the hearers, Ephesians 4:29. See also Philippians 4:8. We must ever remember that it is the house of the Lord and we are to so live and act so that the Lord will be honored and exalted. May we always seek to display the beauty of Psalm 133:1 in the assembly of the saints: "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity."

Regarding the charge against the elder, I think the comments of the Baptist, John Gill, would be good to give. He said, "**Against an elder receive not an accusation**, A charge of any crime: **but before two or three witnesses**; good sufficient ones, who are capable of well attesting the fact: a charge against a pastor of a church is not to be easily received; it should not be listened to privately, unless it clearly appears by such a number of witnesses; nor should it be brought publicly before the church, until it is privately and previously proved, by a sufficient number of credible witnesses, that it is really fact. The sense is, not that judgment shall not pass against him but by such a number of witnesses, or that the evidence upon his trial shall consist of such a number; for this is no other than what ought to be in the case of a private member, and of every man, according to **De 19:15**. But the sense is, that the affair of an elder shall not be put upon a trial, much less sentence pass, until it has been privately proved against him, by proper testimonies, beyond all exception; only in such a case, should a church admit a charge against its elder. The reason of this rule is, because of his high office and the honour of the church, which is concerned in his, as well as of religion; for it carries in it some degree of scandal for such a person to be charged, even though he may be cleared; as also because of his many enemies, who through envy, malice, and the instigation of Satan, would be continually pestering the church with charges, could they be easily admitted."

Obviously, when one has sinned, he is to be rebuked before the entire congregation. This not only administers the proper discipline for the crime committed, but it instills a proper fear in the whole congregation. Notice it did not say to publish it to the denomination, to the world, or to the community in which he dwells. Obviously, some sins may warrant this especially if the sin is of a civil nature; however, this will generally be made know by the civil authorities. The business of the congregation of the Lord is not that of Caesar's business. See I Corinthians 6:1-6. Too often, when a minister has committed such a sin, friends and love ones do not want to embarrass him or his family and it is quietly dismissed or swept under the rug. He then generally moves away and later carries on in a ministry in a different location. This is not to say that such a one may not genuinely repent and be restored to the ministry. That is another subject entirely. The point is that under this situation, the proper discipline was not administered and the house of the Lord suffers and it may likewise never bring the proper peace and reconciliation within the family of the minister, too. Lasting injuries often abide in both houses: the house of God and the house of the minister. It is God's house and we should follow the directions and guidelines laid out by Him if we expect Him to bless the congregation and/or bring restoration to the sinning brother. Remember, he (the minister) too, is a part of the congregation. He is not some outside individual; he is subject to the congregation and should be lovingly administered to as prescribed by the Lord for the good of his soul. It is not for the assembly to quickly sweep everything under the rug and carry on with "business as usual" as

if nothing ever happened. No. It is serious business and like any sickness, often a long and arduous process is necessary for proper healing to occur. For the health of the congregation and the welfare of the minister (and all involved), it is essential that sin within the congregation be handled skillfully and wisely for, *first*, the honor and glory of the Lord; *second*, for the good of the congregation; and, *third*, for the benefit of the minister. All of this further solidifies the truth that the eldership is within and under the authority of the congregation and not some ruling body apart from it, and definitely it is not under the power of some denominational ecclesiastical authority.

Sadly, our time is up for today. The Lord willing we will continue with this topic in our next broadcast.