

“INSTRUCTIONS CONCERNING ELDERS”

I. Introduction

- A. In the fourth chapter of his epistle to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul speaks of the church’s shepherds and teachers as gifts that the ascended Christ bestows upon his church.
- B. He also says that these offices are given “so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.” (Eph 4:14 ESV)
- C. John Calvin comments on that passage by saying, “By these words [the apostle] shows that the ministry of men, which God employs in governing the Church, is a principal bond by which believers are kept together in one body. He also intimates, that the Church cannot be kept safe, unless supported by those guards to which the Lord has been pleased to commit its safety.” [*Institutes*, 4.3.1]
- D. In other words, without the faithful ministry of elders, God’s people will be tossed to and fro, and they will be scattered in every direction.
- E. For this reason, every Christian has a vital interest in upholding the office of elder and ensuring that those who serve in this office are treated properly.
- F. As we study our text in 1 Timothy today, we will consider what it has to say about the compensation, discipline, and ordination of the church’s elders.

II. Compensation

- A. Our passage begins with the apostle Paul saying, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”

1. There are a number of things conveyed to us in this verse.
 2. We begin by considering the term “honor.”
 3. You will recall that this term was used earlier in this chapter to describe the financial support of widows in the church.
 4. Verse 3 says, “Honor widows who are truly widows,” and the following context makes it clear that this is a matter of providing for those widows the church who have no other means of support.
 5. The context of the passage we are study today makes it clear that Paul is using the word “honor” in a similar sense here in verse 17.
 6. The “honor” of which Paul is speaking is primarily about the compensation of elders who engage in ministry as their day-to-day employment.
- B. Having said that, we can also take the term “honor” in a secondary sense in this text.
1. Faithful elders are to be held in high esteem by the congregation.
 2. We see this idea expressed in 1 Thessalonians 5, where Paul says, “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.” (1 Thess. 5:12–13 ESV)
 3. The most basic way in which Christians can honor their elders is by following their teaching and counsel.
 4. Christians can also honor their elders by praying for them and by expressing appreciation for their work.
- C. First Timothy 5:17 is the key proof-text for the Reformed and Presbyterian practice of making a distinction between two types of elders in Christ’s church.

1. Listen to this verse again: "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching."
 2. This verse tells us that all elders engage in the governance of the church and in the spiritual oversight of its members.
 3. It also indicates that the work of some elders is for the most part limited to this governing function.
 4. In Presbyterianism, these men are referred to as ruling elders.
 5. Verse 17 also refers to another type of elder.
 6. This is an elder who joins the ruling elders in seeing to the church's spiritual oversight, but who also labors in the regular ministry of preaching and teaching.
 7. In Presbyterianism, these men are known as teaching elders, or pastors, or ministers.
 8. To summarize, all elders rule, and some elders rule and conduct the bulk of the church's public teaching ministry.
- D. As we have already noted, the overall context of this passage indicates that Paul's exhortation for faithful elders to be considered worthy of double honor is primarily about financial remuneration.
1. This does not mean that all of a church's elders have to be compensated for the service that they perform for the church.
 2. While there might be situations in which a congregation is able to hire one or more of its ruling elders so that they can give more time to the duties of the office, most churches are not able to do that.
 3. Most of the time, ruling elders will have their regular employment outside the church.

4. But when it comes to the minister, the ideal is for him to be employed full time in his work so that he can devote himself to the teaching and preaching of God's Word.
 5. For this reason, the main application of verses 17 and 18 is that ministers should earn a sufficient livelihood for their labors in the ministry.
- E. The phrase translated as "double honor" might be a bit confusing.
1. What does Paul mean by this?
 2. Old Testament scholar Meredith Kline has convincingly argued in an article entitled "Double Trouble" that it is misleading to translate this word as "double" in this context.
 3. The idea that is being conveyed here is that of a duplicate or equivalent payment.
 4. In other words, faithful ministers and elders should be given honor is equivalent to the work that they perform.
- F. The financial nature of this honor is further emphasized by the passages of Scripture that Paul quotes in verse 18.
1. The first citation is from Deuteronomy 25:4, which says that it is wrong to deny food to an ox while it is doing its work.
 2. Paul is comparing us ministers to oxen.
 3. What is true for domestic animals is also true for pastors.
 4. The second citation is from Luke 10:7, where Jesus sends out seventy-two of his followers to preach in his name and tells them that they should accept the support that people provide for them as they go from town to town.

5. We should note the significance of the fact that Paul refers to Luke's Gospel as Scripture.
 6. He sets this verse alongside the Old Testament as the Word of God
- G. It is not surprising that the apostle Paul thought that it was necessary to address the matter of pastoral compensation.
1. This is often a matter of concern in Christ's church.
 2. Speaking personally, I am grateful for the generous support that I receive from this congregation.
 3. But this is not always the norm.
 4. Some churches are quite stingy toward their pastors.
 5. Some churches even try to excuse their stinginess by assuming that this will somehow make their pastor more spiritual.
 6. And of course there are some churches that would like to pay their pastors more than they do but simply cannot afford it.
 7. The reason why this is an important issue is because the prospect of inadequate pay can deter men from considering the ministry.
 8. This is an especially important consideration in our tradition, where we ordinarily require ministers to have a four-year undergraduate degree and at least a three-year graduate degree.
 9. That is a lot of education, and it often results in the accumulation of a significant amount of debt.
 10. We should always remember that a church's attitude towards the compensation of its minister is a reflection of the value that it places on the gospel ministry.

III. Discipline

- A. The second issue that is addressed in our text has to do with the discipline of elders.
1. Paul says, "Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses."
 2. In other words, the principle that the law of Moses sets forth for judicial cases in general is to be applied to situations where charges are brought against an elder.
 3. Paul says that charges against an elder should not even be considered unless they can first be substantiated.
 4. The reason why it was necessary for Paul to address this is because pastors and elders are sometimes slandered by people.
 5. There are a number of things that can motivate people to do this.
 6. A person might not be happy about a decision or stance taken by the church's elders.
 7. A person might be upset because the elders did not do something that he or she wanted them to do.
 8. A person might be angry about a disciplinary action taken by the elders.
 9. When such things happen, it is not uncommon for people to say negative things about a church's elders, whether by word of mouth or through the internet or social media.
 10. This passage makes it clear that those sorts of things should not be given any credence at all.
- B. Of course, this does not mean that ministers and elders should be shielded from accusations of wrongdoing by nature of their office.
1. If there are legitimate concerns, if there are allegations that can be substantiated, those things should be brought before the proper

church court for careful consideration.

2. In the case of a ruling elder, charges are to be brought to the Session of that elder's church.
 3. In the case of a minister, charges are to be brought to the Presbytery of which that minister is a member.
 4. In the case of a Session as a whole, charges are to be brought to the Presbytery if the Session's response to the concerns seems unsatisfactory.
 5. If charges against a minister or elder or Session are upheld, then it is a matter of church censure.
 6. And in cases where there is an unrepentant persistence in sin, the offending minister or elder is to be publicly censured.
 7. This principle would also apply in situations involving public scandal.
 8. As Paul says in verse 20, the administration of discipline needs to be public in such instances in order to deter others from falling into sin.
- C. In verse 21, Paul sums up the basic principles that are to be used in cases involving the discipline of elders by telling Timothy that he is to avoid two things in such situations.
1. First, he must not be prejudiced.
 2. It is important that we not make up our minds about a man's guilt before giving him a fair trial.
 3. Second, Timothy must not show partiality.
 4. It is also important that we not play favorites and let a man off the hook when the evidence is clearly against him.

- D. Notice also how Paul issues this summary of his charge to Timothy in verse 21.
1. He says that he gives this charge “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels.”
 2. This tells us a number of important things.
 3. First, it reminds us that we live in the presence of God and are accountable to him.
 4. Second, it points to the fact that judgment has been entrusted to Christ.
 5. And third, it tells us that the elect angels, who stand in contrast to the fallen angels, will not only stand as witnesses at the final judgment on the last day, but they also witness the judgments that Christ makes through his church in this present age.

IV. Ordination

- A. This brings us to the third issue that is addressed in our text: the issue of the ordination of elders.
1. This is what Paul is talking about when he tells Timothy not to be hasty in the laying on of hands.
 2. The church’s elders need to take time to observe and evaluate a man before they commend him for election and ordain him as a fellow elder.
 3. If the elders fail to do this, they will bear some of the responsibility if the man ends up falling into sin.
 4. There can be situations where it is tempting to ordain new officers in a speedy manner, but this is a mistake for a variety of reasons.
 5. Paul elaborates upon this in verses 24 and 25.

6. On the one hand, while some sins are so evident that they immediately disqualify a man from consideration for the office of elder, other sins are beneath the surface and only become evident over time.
 7. On the other hand, while some men have attractive personalities that cause them to be seen as clear choices for the office of elder, other men who may not initially stand out possess hidden strengths that would make them highly useful as elders.
 8. Time needs to be taken in this matter so that we can look beyond outward appearances and assess a man's heart.
- B. In the midst of this discussion, Paul makes a parenthetical statement in verse 23, urging Timothy to no longer only drink water but to drink a little wine as well.
1. This instruction seems to have been prompted by the exhortation that Paul gives at the end of verse 22, urging Timothy to keep himself pure.
 2. Now, given what we know of the situation in Ephesus, it is likely that the false teachers there were telling people that they have to abstain from drinking wine if they want to be pure.
 3. Paul does not want Timothy to be taken in by that illegitimate form of self-denial.
 4. Of course, Scripture is very clear in teaching that drunkenness is a sin and that an elder should not be addicted to much wine.
 5. However, Scripture also explicitly says that God gives "wine to gladden the heart of man" (Ps. 104:15) and that Jesus' first miracle was turning water into wine at a wedding celebration.
 6. Moreover, in the ancient world, wine was regarded as having medicinal properties, and there is considerable evidence today to confirm this.

7. Another thing to keep in mind is that the drinking water in the ancient world often contained pollutants, as is still the case in many parts of the world today.
8. For whatever reason, Timothy suffered from frequent stomach ailments.
9. Paul wanted him to know that there was no reason why he should not avail himself of the potential benefits of drinking a little wine.
10. Even though this verse is parenthetical, it is significant because it tells us that excessive severity in living can be as much of a fault as overindulgence.
11. While Christians should exercise self-control in all areas of life, austerity is not commendable, especially if it makes us less productive and less useful.

V. Conclusion

- A. As believers in Jesus Christ, we have the Lord as our Shepherd.
- B. At the same time, we have also been given human shepherds to watch over us in Christ's name.
- C. It should be a great encouragement to us that our Lord has given the same name that he uses to describe his watchful and perfect care over his people to those whom he calls to the office of spiritual oversight in his church.
- D. So let us be thankful for the office of elder, let us guard this office, and let us always strive to honor and support those who serve in it.