

# **Living in God's Church Today**

## **The Church's Obligation to Its Elders**

*1 Timothy 5:17-25*

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May 29, 2022

# The Church's Obligation to Its Elders

## Scripture

Paul understood that there was a crisis of leadership in Ephesus. In chapter 4:1-5, Paul pointed out some of the distinctive emphases of the false teachers. In chapter 5:11-16, he focused on the younger widows who seemed to have fallen under the influence of the false teachers. Then in chapter 5:17-25, Paul set down the church's obligations to its elders.

Let us read about the church's obligation to its elders in 1 Timothy 5:17-25:

**<sup>17</sup> Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. <sup>18</sup> For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages." <sup>19</sup> Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>20</sup> As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. <sup>21</sup> In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. <sup>22</sup> Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure. <sup>23</sup> (No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.) <sup>24</sup> The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. <sup>25</sup> So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden. (1 Timothy 5:17-25)**

## Introduction

Leaders can cause great damage to a church. When a church member sins, his sin may impact only himself. But when a church leader sins, his sin impacts the entire church.

About six months ago, our Presbytery disciplined a Teaching Elder who had confessed to an improper relationship with a woman who was not his wife. He was censured for that confession of guilt. However, after that censure was imposed he would no longer participate in defending further charges that were lodged against him. Earlier this month, he was deposed from his office as a Teaching Elder and excluded from the sacraments of the church. That is, he was excommunicated.

These allegations against the minister surfaced a year ago and finally brought him to confess his sin. The church that he pastored went through a significant amount of upheaval and turmoil. Many members left the church in the wake of the pastor's confession of sin. Thankfully, the Presbytery has just this month approved an experienced minister to serve as an Interim Pastor to help them get back on track.

Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to get the Ephesian church back on track. The Ephesian church was confronted with false teaching and young Timothy was feeling timid and overwhelmed.

In the text we are going to examine today, Paul told Timothy what a truly biblical eldership looked like. He did not repeat the qualifications for elders that he had given in chapter 3. In today's text, Paul was not concerned about the character and qualifications of the elder. Rather, he was concerned about how the church viewed its elders. Paul wanted Timothy to teach the church about its obligations to its elders.

## Lesson

1 Timothy 5:17-25 gives us practical instruction for the church's obligation to its elders.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Church Must Honor Faithful Elders (5:17-18)
2. The Church Must Protect Accused Elders (5:19)
3. The Church Must Rebuke Sinning Elders (5:20-21)
4. The Church Must Select Qualified Elders (5:22-25)

### I. The Church Must Honor Faithful Elders (5:17-18)

First, the church must honor faithful elders.

Paul wrote in verse 17, **“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”** The elders are men who are called by God to serve as shepherds of the local congregation. They are the spiritual overseers in the church.

The Greek word that is translated as **“honor”** (*time*) can mean either “price, value, compensation, or honor,” depending on the context. Certainly, elders who serve God and his people well should be esteemed and appreciated appropriately for their service. In those instances in which elders receive payment for their service, they should be properly compensated.

The expression **“double honor”** does not mean that they should receive twice as much as others, but because of their faithful service, they should be paid generously.

The Greek word for **“especially”** (*malista*) carries the idea of “chiefly” or “particularly.” It seems that Paul recognized that some elders would labor chiefly in the ministry of exposition and teaching. The Greek word for **“labor”** (*kopiaio*) means “to do wearisome labor, or labor unto extreme fatigue.”

Paul stressed not so much the amount of the work being done in preaching and teaching but rather the effort that went into the work of preaching and teaching.

Serving as an elder shepherding the souls of those for whom the Chief Shepherd gave his life is an incredibly demanding task. In every local church, there are sheep and, sadly, some goats. And among the sheep in the local church all need care and support and direction and sometimes correction. Elders need godly wisdom and patience and fortitude in caring for those precious souls. All elders are involved in the ministry of the word and prayer (according to Acts 6:2). However, some are particularly called to a ministry of preaching and teaching. These elders we call Teaching Elders or Ministers. All the elders of a local church need the prayer and support and encouragement of the flock so that they may serve them as effectively as possible.

To back up his practical instruction that the church must honor faithful elders, Paul quoted Scripture. He wrote in verse 18, **“For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’”** Paul quoted a Scripture from the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 25:4) and also the New Testament (Luke 10:7). The point of both passages is that a worker deserves to be paid. However, what is very interesting is that Paul affirmed Luke’s writing to be **“Scripture.”** This shows that Paul recognized that Luke wrote *The Gospel of Luke* under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Two thoughts spring from this verse. First, Paul considered Luke’s writing to be Scripture. We do not have to wait for centuries for later councils to affirm the canonicity of *The Gospel of Luke*. Paul, himself writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, affirmed *The Gospel of Luke* as the word of God.

And second, elders laboring in the ministry of preaching and teaching, deserve to be paid. I knew a pastor once who told us that his church simply stopped paying him. When I asked the reason for this, he said that this was their way of showing their disagreement with his preaching and teaching. Most pastors love what they do. They would preach the glorious gospel without payment if they could. However, they have to be able to live and take care of themselves and their families, if they have one. They should be properly compensated and honored for their labors. I am grateful for the generous support of the church I serve. But I know that not all pastors have such a supportive congregation.

So, the church must honor faithful elders.

## II. The Church Must Protect Accused Elders (5:19)

Second, the church must protect accused elders.

Paul wrote in verse 19, **“Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.”** Paul applied the same standard to elders as Jesus did for any church member. Paul recalled Jesus' words in Matthew 18:15-16, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” The process for the whole church also applied to elders. Paul did not want to place elders beyond accusation but he did want to protect them from frivolous accusations.

Elders are more vulnerable in the church since they are more visible. They not only face temptations as all believers do, but they also face increased opposition from Satan. He will

do whatever he can to tempt an elder into some sin or to bring great torment to him. Sometimes, elders are accused of sins that they did not commit. That is why elders need to be protected from frivolous accusations. On the other hand, if there are two or three witnesses to some sin, they are to provide evidence of the elder's misconduct and sin.

So, the church must honor faithful elders and protect accused elders.

### III. The Church Must Rebuke Sinning Elders (5:20-21)

Third, the church must rebuke sinning elders.

Paul wrote in verse 20, **“As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.”** Paul had just told Timothy not to entertain a charge against an elder unless there were two or three witnesses (see verse 19). However, after an elder has been confronted with a charge of some kind of sin by two or three witnesses and found guilty, Timothy was to rebuke him in the presence of the elders and congregation. This is the third step of confrontation that Jesus outlined in Matthew 18:17. Timothy was to call the sinning elder to repentance. Such formal discipline causes the entire body of believers to stand in reverent fear.

Church leaders do not relish the imposition of church discipline. Many church leaders simply do not exercise church discipline. That is a mistake. On the other hand, some church leaders do exercise church discipline when necessary. I mentioned that earlier this month our Presbytery had to discipline a Teaching Elder by deposing him from office and excluding him from the sacraments. I can tell you it was a very sobering and sad day for us. But it confirmed to the Presbytery and its membership that we are serious about doing what the Lord

calls us to do regarding church discipline. It causes all of us to take greater care about how we live and conduct ourselves. And that is as it should be, according to Paul's direction to Timothy.

Paul wrote in verse 21, **“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.”** This charge is expressed in a surprisingly strong manner. Paul's charge to Timothy is given in view of heaven's court, adding to its solemnity. If elders have committed censurable sin, then discipline of them was to be done fairly, without prejudgment or personal preference. It was to be done to all elders according to the standards of Scripture.

I know elders who have committed censurable sin. When the sin has been brought to their attention, some elders are immediately repentant. They confess their sin. They submit themselves to the discipline of the church, regardless of the personal, family, and professional pain it brings upon them.

On the other hand, some elders deny and deflect any charges against them. They assert their innocence or they minimize the severity of their sin. In all cases, however, the elders exercising discipline must do so with care and compassion, and always in accordance with the standards of Scripture.

So, the church must honor faithful elders, protect accused elders, and rebuke sinning elders.

#### **IV. The Church Must Select Qualified Elders (5:22-25)**

And finally, the church must select qualified elders.

Paul wrote in verse 22, **“Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.”** Paul was referring to what we call an “ordination



service.” When a man was called by God and affirmed by the church as one so called, he was ordained into the office of an elder. However, there were apparently some men who were ordained without a thorough investigation and preparation period to be certain of that man’s qualifications (in accordance with 3:1-7). Paul saw this hasty ordination as a sin, and he did not want Timothy to take part in the sins of those who prematurely ordained a man to the office of elder. Instead, he was to keep himself pure from the sin of premature ordination.

Every church needs to select qualified elders to serve that church. However, there is always a strong temptation to ordain men into office who are not qualified or ready to serve as elders. I remember a man telling me many years ago in my previous church that he thought that we should ordain men as elders who were skilled in business, finance, and leadership. He was serious! While it would be great if elders had skills in these areas, none of them are *required* qualifications for the eldership, according to 1 Timothy 3:1-7. It is better to have an eldership of a few qualified men than many men, some of whom are unqualified to serve as elders.

Then, in a personal aside, Paul wrote directly to Timothy in verse 23, **“No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.”** In Paul’s day, water was not as clean as it is today. There were no water plants and purification processes to ensure that there was clean and safe drinking water. Apparently, Timothy must have had some kind of commitment to abstaining from drinking alcohol. However, Paul urged Timothy not to risk illness, not ever for the sake of a commitment to abstinence from wine. Wine acted as a disinfectant and helped to reduce the harmful effects of drinking water that may have carried some impurities. Paul was not concerned that Timothy

would drink excessively. He urged Timothy to drink a little wine for medicinal purposes. Nevertheless, Paul was not advocating a lowering of standards for leaders.

Paul then wrote in verses 24-25, **“The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.”** Some sins are so clear to everyone that such men are readily disqualified from serving as elders. The **“judgment”** here in this verse refers to the assessment by the rest of the elders about the fitness of a man to serve alongside them as an elder. The sins of others that **“appear later”** seem to refer to the scrutiny during the evaluation process that brings to light certain disqualifying sins. The same is true of good works. Some are evident to all whereas others only come to light after scrutiny and evaluation. Paul’s emphasis in these verses is to be fair, patient, impartial, and pure (vv. 21-25). Following this approach will yield the right men to serve as elders in the church.

Churches have different ways of ordaining men to the office of elder. Usually, the men under consideration have been attending the church for several years. They will go through a period of instruction in the duties and responsibilities of the office. They will also be instructed in the doctrine of the church. And they will spend time examining the character qualifications required for serving as an elder. In our church, we then require men to write a written exam to see how well they can articulate their understanding of Bible doctrine, church polity, and Biblical qualifications for church office. At that point, they are ready to be nominated by the congregation to serve as an elder. Once they are nominated, we then ask them to serve for an entire year as an “elder in training.” This allows the rest of the elders an opportunity to get to know the man

better, and it also allows the prospective elder an opportunity to see up close what is involved in serving as an elder. After that year, there is an oral examination by the elders to see if the man is ready and fit to serve in the office of elder. Only after successfully completing each of these steps is the man then presented to the congregation for election to the office of elder. If he is elected to the office of elder, he is then ordained and installed as an elder in our church. We believe that such a lengthy process helps our church to select qualified elders.

So, the church must honor faithful elders, protect accused elders, rebuke sinning elders, and select qualified elders.

### **Conclusion**

Therefore, having analyzed the church's obligation to its elders in 1 Timothy 5:17-25, let us thank God for the elders of this church and, further, let us ask him to give us more, godly, and qualified elders to serve this church.

I thank God for the elders he has given this church. Some are retired and others still have full-time jobs. They serve diligently and faithfully. They love the Lord and they love you, the people of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church. I encourage you also to give thanks to God for our elders.

But let us also ask God to give us more, godly, and qualified elders to serve this church. Three more active Ruling Elders will be such a blessing to the Session and also to this congregation. If you believe that God may be calling you to serve as a Ruling Elder in this congregation, please let one of the elders or me know about your interest. May God be glorified as we seek to serve him here in New Tampa. Amen.

# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church  
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. <https://tampabaypresbyterian.org/SermonAudio>.
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