



Biblical Principles Criticism of Elders

by Chuck Gianotti

Studies in 1 Timothy 5:20-25—Part 14

As an elder, you will be criticized—that is axiomatic. Sometimes it comes from well-meaning Christians who are trying to “help” you. Sometimes, from those who for various reasons (whether jealousy, insecurity, fear, selfishness – you can probably add some other reasons) feel “called upon by God” to be the prophets of criticism. But at other times, the criticism may be justified—you have fallen short in some area! These are all hazards of the trade, so to speak. And they are very real.

In the last two issues of ESN we talked of honoring elders based on 1 Tim 5:18-19. The reality, though, is that elders probably receive more criticism than honor. Being an elder is a very risky proposition. As one brother said, “When I became an elder I didn’t realize that I was stepping into the line of fire.”

No other ministry has such high standards and expectations from others. Being in the lead of anything exposes a person, leaving them vulnerable to the arrows of criticism. So elders in the church need special protection.

Paul, in 1 Tim 5:19-25, lays out some specific ways for safeguarding elder ministry in the face of criticisms or accusations:

Separate out the spurious (19)

Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses (NASB).

While Paul was quite adamant about the inferiority of the Law to grace when it comes to justification, he none-the-less found value in its practical application to relationships among God’s people. In particular, he alludes to Deut. 17:6 and 19:15, 18 and 19 where the Law speaks of handling personal accusations of wrong doing.

The phrase “two or three” occurs frequently in both the OT and NT and infers “more than one.” There must be at least 2 or 3 people willing to vocalize and take responsibility for their accusation. In fact, under the Law, it was the witnesses that were to be the first to execute judgment (Deut 17:7)! Paul’s intent is not to bring us under the Law, but to apply the principle found in the Law to the treatment of elders, namely that they should be protected from superficial criticism.

An older brother once gave me some

wise advice when, as a young leader, I was weighed down by criticism: “A man who is never criticized is a man who never does anything.” In other words, don’t be too discouraged, it comes with the territory. That was a tremendous encouragement to this young leader!

However, at times, criticism can wear a man down. So Paul instructs church leaders to carefully evaluate criticism against a fellow leader. There must be substantial evidence of wrong doing. This means when you or I as elders hear rumors, innuendo, gossip or any kind of idle criticism against a fellow elder, we should give the benefit of the doubt to that elder. After all, the elder has been deemed qualified, and therefore is presumed to be spiritually mature. The other elders, of all people, ought to resist the rush to judgment (see Proverbs 18:17).

If a person feels there are legitimate grounds for an accusation, he comprises a single “witness” and, according to Matt 18:15-16, should therefore go to the elder alone with his concern. If that does not bring resolution,

then “two or three” witnesses should be employed to “confirm every fact” —which brings us back to 1 Tim 5:19! There is a responsible, Biblical pattern to follow when genuine concerns arise.

Now, what if an elder refuses the admonition of “two or three witnesses” and continues in his sinful behavior? Then there needs to be public censure! Paul now addresses this.

Respond intentionally and clearly (1 Tim 5:20, 24-25)

Notwithstanding the cautionary protection for elders, when an elder *does* sin and it becomes public – in other words, there is a justifiable accusation from more than one person, then the full force of Matt 18:17 must be brought forward. Namely, he should, as Paul puts it here, be rebuked “*in the presence of the congregation.*”

This is severe treatment and not to be engaged in lightly. A few observations are in order. A) The treatment of elders and the standards to which they are held, in reality, are the same for all Christians. B) If ever there is a time to press the standard, it is with those who accept the mantle of eldership. C) Public rebuke carries a deterrent value so the rest also will be fearful of sinning” (verse 20). Yes, there is a place for “fear” in the

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Leadership Principles

Growing People Through The Word

by Jack Spender

The familiar saying, “The Word of God builds the church” is true. Did you ever notice the interesting order of events in Acts 6:7 describing the growth of the early church? After decisive leadership cleared up a problem that was threatening the peace and health of the work, we read that “the word of God increased, and the number of the disciples multiplied...” (KJV). In other words, the growth of the church was a direct result of the spread of God’s Word among the people. There is a message here for elders today.

In many places the church is anemic and shrinking because the influence of the Word is greatly diminished. Shallow, abbreviated messages compete with entertainment in the church. As predicted, preachers can be more concerned to please the hearers (“tickle the ears” II Tim. 4:3) than to faithfully present the Christian message in power and simplicity. The sad result is a common occurrence.

Church elders are responsible to protect the assembly from these trends. However, they must first be convinced about the life-changing power of the Scriptures, through which the people hear, understand and obey. This process is really at the heart of the gospel, and therefore must be understood. Three passages will help us.

Matthew 13

The central chapters of Matthew’s gospel describe a crisis in the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus. Being rejected by the religious leaders of the nation, several new things are recorded in this section. The Lord begins to speak about his coming death (16:21), refers for the first time to the church (16:18), and begins to speak to the people in parables (13:10). When questioned by the disciples about this new approach, Jesus explains that it was given to them to know these mysteries, but to the multitudes it was not given (13:11). Why would He say this?”

The explanation is deeply interesting. Verses 12 – 17 must be read carefully. A distinction is made between seeing and perceiving; between hearing and understanding. For example, compare the attitude of the prophets and righteous

men of the past who “desired to see” (v. 17) with the people of Jesus’ day as described by Isaiah: “their eyes they have closed” (vs. 15). Rejecting the plain revelation of God, they have now been given over to a judicial blindness and hardened heart which cannot understand the truth.

In verse 18, Jesus tells His disciples, “Hear therefore the parable of the sower.” This could not mean that He was going to tell them the parable, as He had already done that earlier. It could only mean that He was going to give them understanding into its true and deeper meaning, which is what in fact happens.

We learn several things from Jesus’ explanation of the parable. 1) Light rejected brings darkness. 2) God’s Spirit will not always strive with man. 3) There is a superficial seeing and hearing that brings no work of God; no change to the heart or life.

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This presents the divine side, but what about man’s responsibility in the process?

Luke 8

Turning to the parallel passage in Luke’s gospel, one helpful detail is added. After speaking the parable of the sower, the Lord makes this stirring statement: “Take heed, therefore, how ye hear.” (verse 18) The NIV renders it, “Therefore consider carefully how you listen.” That is, “Pay attention to how you listen when God speaks!” We might say, “Be sure you listen with understanding.”

God holds those who hear His Word responsible for the way in which they listen. The goal is to grasp the message in such a way that it connects through the mind to the heart, becoming available as a tool for God’s Spirit to transform the life.

One other passage will complete the picture by reminding us of how those in spiritual leadership can play an important part in the over-all process.

Nehemiah 9

After the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem in the days of Israel’s restoration from captivity in Babylon, one thing was still needed: spiritual renewal in the hearts of the people. Accordingly, a great revival is described in chapters 8 – 10. Briefly stated, the people were gathered, the book of the Law was read and lives began to change. Of special importance is the 8th verse in chapter 8. Note three statements:

First, those who read the Law of God, did so distinctly. How important is clear communication! All that obscures must be corrected. Every distraction and competing voice must be stilled. The Word must be spoken clearly to be effective.

Second, we read that they gave the sense, that is, they explained the meaning of what they read. The goal was not speed but comprehension. Answering such questions as, “What did the Lord intend by the things that He spoke? Do we understand what these particular words mean; why were they chosen and not other words?”

Third, they caused the people to understand the reading. How do you *cause* people to understand? That is a hard question, and we must approach it more with reverence than with scholarship. Evidently they labored with such clarity, with such patient spirit and helpful explanation, that it might be said that the people could not help but understand! No surprise then, that revival had a beginning that day!

Conclusion

Elders, let us take this to heart. If the first work of elders is to feed the flock of God (Acts 20:28) and if it is true that the church will grow as the Word of God increases, then what diligence and care must accompany all preaching and teaching of the Word? Surely, the adversary will wage no greater war than against the life-giving, life-changing Word of God?

Here are some questions to stimulate discussion on this subject:

- How much time is devoted to prayer for the ministry of the Word in the life of the church?

- On what basis are speakers chosen to open the Scriptures in your assembly?

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A Song For Serving

by Mary Gianotti

We have entered a new year. As Anne of Green Gables said, "Tomorrow is a fresh, new day with no mistakes in it." What a lovely thought. A whole untarnished year lies ahead of us. *But then the reality of who we are comes crashing through those thoughts.*

Over the past weeks I have been meditating on Zechariah's song in the first chapter of Luke. Zechariah says, "He has come ... to enable us to serve Him without fear in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days." Among the many wonderful reasons the Messiah came to earth was His plan to "enable us


to serve Him." Webster's Dictionary gives the following definition for the word *enable*: "to provide the means or the opportunity, to make practical, possible or easy." How relieving this is! Christ came to provide the means and opportunity to serve God.

Serving God does not depend on our valiant effort or our ability to do things perfectly; instead, the Lord Jesus Christ came to do His work through me. And if I allow him to do His work through me, He promises two things.

The first is that I can serve "without fear." The feelings of inadequacy and not measuring up can be

dismissed. I serve in His strength and with all my heart. I do not have to fear human criticism or God's punishment.

Secondly, He promises that I will serve him "in holiness and righteousness." Before God I can stand forgiven of past sins: the people I have offended, times of self pity and pride are all covered by the blood of Jesus' sacrifice. In this confidence I serve the King of Kings.

As we imagine Zechariah's song echoing off the synagogue walls centuries ago, may we join our hearts and voices with him in 2008, confident that "He has come to enable me to serve... and I will serve Him all my days." 

Leadership Principles

The Gift of Organization

by Dave McClurkin

Every body has a skeleton. Every business needs structure and order. Every city needs an infrastructure. And a healthy church needs functional structures to carry out its mandate of touching people's lives with the life changing message of Jesus. Wherever people live, the infrastructure that makes up their world needs to be soundly based and securely built. It's true of a body. It's true of a business. It's true of a city. It's true of a country. It'd true of a family.

And it's true of a church. And it's the skeletons, the structures and infrastructures that bring effectiveness into all that happens. There is a great statement in Psalm 11:3 that underscores the value of infrastructure. "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" In other words, if the infrastructure is crumbling even the good is undermined and even righteous people become ineffective.

I have always been intrigued with the way in which the Queen of Sheba responded to the infrastructure of Solomon's court. 1 Kings 10:4-5 (NLT): *When the queen of Sheba realized how very wise Solomon was, and when she saw the palace he had built, she was overwhelmed. She was also amazed at the food on his tables, the organization of his officials and their splendid clothing, the cup-bearers, and the burnt offerings Solomon made at the Temple of the LORD.*

The operative word is "organization." There seemed to be systems and procedures and expectations in

place that caused amazement and awe in the Queen. She saw it as wisdom. ("how very wise Solomon was!") The irony is that what so impressed the Queen of Sheba is the very thing we are afraid of – too much organization! I wonder what she would have thought if she sat in our churches just to observe. What makes for healthy structure and organization in the church? May I suggest four things?

Leaders who lead but wear the mantle of leadership lightly.

They are servant leaders. They have learned the art of delegation by passing the torch to qualified ministry leaders, empowering them to serve and releasing them to their ministry roles.

They serve as encouragers and applaud their progress. They gain respect by loving those who make things happen on the front lines. There is in place an appointment and removal process that includes their qualifications, a defined term of service, a workable decision making process and a definition of their roles and parameters of authority. People feel safe and secure in an environment of stability and predictability.

Personnel who serve in their area of spiritual giftedness.

... The question is continually being asked, "Do we have the right people in the right places doing the right things?" Without this analysis the church will have people serving outside their spiritual giftedness and therefore feeling frustrated, pow-

erless and ineffective. Their service becomes drudgery and not a joy. Instead of feeling invigorated they feel like every step is uphill.

A decision making process that engages every level of the church community.

Church people need to know that the decision making process is working. The congregation should know what decisions are made at various spheres of church life – those made by the Leadership Team ... Ministry Leaders, as well as the decisions that require congregational approval.

Programming that addresses the needs of the congregation.

Sunday services, outreach and community programs, small groups, children and youth programs– do they make it easy for people to engage in the life of the church?

All of these reflect the strength of the church's infrastructure. Like the Queen of Sheba, people become "overwhelmed" when they see God work through the organizational components of church life. Maybe structure and organization are what's needed to bring the "wow" to our churches as people observe the church in action – Christ followers radically committed to Jesus and caring enough to do it right. As one writer put it, "There's nothing like the local church when it's working right. Nothing!"

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Criticism (cont.)

Christian walk, in the sense that God takes sin in the believer's life seriously. He is not mocked; we had better understand that. Grace does not render holy behavior optional—God expects holiness (1 Pet 1:15-16), especially in the leaders.

Now there are two sides to this issue of rebuke. The elders, along with the church, must rebuke their errant fellow-elder. But elders must model the willingness to receive correction. Every elder at times needs correction, sometimes even rebuke. Indeed, modeling Christ-likeness as an elder is not for the faint heart. Even King David, the "man after God's heart" accepted the rebuke of Nathan the prophet. So, we as elders, absolutely must have that quality of godliness which welcomes correction. "A rebuke goes deeper into one who has understanding, than a hundred blows into a fool" Prov 17:10 (See also Prov 8:33, 9:8-9).

Avoid favoritism (21)

The nature of this issue, as most elders have experienced, is not always easy. Some elders form closer bonds with some of their fellow elders than with others. The human tendency toward bias waxes strong and can result in either overly lenient treatment or overly harsh treatment. This can be especially true when there are blood or marriage relationships involved. Elders need to identify this tendency and have the courage to objectively respond biblically in these matters.

Prevent the avoidable (22)

The weight of these matters leads Paul to caution against thrusting any man too quickly into the role of elder. Someone who is not spiritually ready or sufficiently mentored will fall prey to the


pressures.

This is critical, because often an assembly can become desperate for more elders and may take short cuts to add to their number. In business, leaders latch onto the bright rising stars and thrust them into significant positions of responsibility where they either flourish or they bomb out. But eldership in the church is not the place for "rising stars" nor is it a way for a young Christian to "make his mark." The spiritual health of the believers is greatly affected by the spiritual functioning of the elders. Some men have buckled under the weight.

Watch your health (23)

It is no mere coincidence that Paul now counsels Timothy to take care of his health: "*Use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.*" The pressures of shepherding can affect one's health. Is it possible that Timothy experienced ulcers or other stress related disorders? Elders need to look after their health so they will be able to handle the stresses of watching over the flock of God.

Conclusion:

Although elders are (or should be) qualified and spiritually mature, they are still men of the flesh. They are both subject to personal faults and sins, as well as subject to false criticisms—a cross-fire of sorts. We need to ensure the elders protect one another and at the same time are courageous enough to confront one another about their sins and shortcomings. As the elders take these instructions seriously, they become God's model for how he wants all believers in the church. 

Growing People (cont.)

Do you look for simple availability or the deeper matters of gift, burden, credibility?


- What attempts are made to expose the saints to the whole counsel of God; the long books as well as the short ones; the Old Testament as well as the New Testament; the great doctrines of the faith, not just our pet subjects?

- What opportunities are provided for the people to ask questions, clear up misunderstandings and obtain advice on life applications that will please the Lord? Informal times of fellowship, one-on-one conversations, visiting in the homes of the believers, and small groups meeting mid-week are all ways to address this need.

- Are the elders diligent to be sure that presenting of the Word takes place in an environment conducive to quality listening?

- Do the elders discuss ways to build "bridges" between the ministry given on Sunday, and the body life and service of the saints during the week?

- Are there times to thank and praise the Lord for the progress being gained by the growing influence of His Word in the life of the assembly?

Many other questions could be raised. Perhaps we can say with Paul, "Consider what I say, and the Lord give thee understanding in all things." (II Tim. 2:7) So then, spiritual growth in the people is not a matter of chance or good fortune. The Word of God does build the church. What an indescribable privilege for elders to "cause the people to understand" the Scriptures! We should settle for nothing less. 

ELDERS' SHOPNOTES

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