



## Biblical Foundations Foundation for Serving

by Chuck Gianotti

*Studies in 2 Timothy—Part 4 (3:1-15)*

Every generation feels theirs is the worst. When things seem bad concerning the world of politics, wars, moral decay and blatant sinfulness, Christian decay, “We are in the last days!” When I was saved in 1972, the widely popular movie, “Thief in the Night” and the book, “Late, Great, Planet Earth” were stock fare for the evangelical Christian community. As a young, wide-eyed and open-spirited believer, I fully expected the rapture would take place any day, certainly within my life time and the sooner the better. The “last days,” after all, is a not so-uncommon theme in the New Testament, from Peter’s Pentecostal quotation of Joel’s prophecy in Acts 2:16-21 to the great prophecies of the ends times outlined in the Book of the Revelation.

While our timing in the 1970’s was off, the idea was not. Christians are continually warned throughout Scripture that the last days are indeed near. As each generation confronts an ungodly world, holiness reacts to immorality with a sense of revulsion. In our passage, Paul gives a snapshot of the moral character of the last days.

Note that the content of Paul’s concern is as appropriate for us now as it was for the Christians of his day. He writes that, in anticipation of the last days, we should “Avoid such men as these” (3:5 NASB), that is, men who exhibit certain ungodly characteristics. That future was not so far distant that it was irrelevant to his reader, Timothy. The symptoms of the last days are always present! In every generation, elders and Christian leaders need to be on the lookout for the telltale signs of the “last days” in the church.

### Snapshot of the last days (1-5)

Nineteen characteristics are listed by the apostle as symptoms of the “end times.” Focus is given to character and attitude rather than specific activities. In other places, Scripture points out things like wars increasing, the abomination of desolation, etc. These are all geo-politic-religious indicators of

the prophetic time clock ticking away. But one can see the moral character decline moving relentlessly toward the end—and to that we turn.

The list is too long to expound in detail here, but we note two, the first and the last, for special consideration. They form bookends for the list. First, “men will be lovers of self” (2 Tim 3:2), an attitude that so easily infiltrates the church. Elders need to make sure this is not descriptive of themselves. This is probably the greatest road block to effective elder-shepherding, - an unwillingness to set aside personal desires or self-centered needs for the sake of serving others. It can perhaps be seen as the underlying cause of the other eighteen characteristics.

The last characteristic is the spiritually ugly trait of “*holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power*” (3:5a). Such behavior may look good in the eyes of carnal Christians but is repugnant to God. To

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the Colossians, Paul echoed this thought, “... [the commandments and teachings of men]... have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made

religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence” (Col 2:b-23).

Elders need to avoid the duplicity of presenting a false spiritual showing while lacking spiritual power. In addition, they need to be able to recognize this in others as well. While superficial judgment is not called for, the shepherds of God do need to be discerning. Indeed, there is way too much superficial, worldly leadership in the church today and too little spiritual power with real change in people’s lives.

Paul’s solution is simple and to the point: avoid people like those described here! Their attitudes can be contagious! Keep in mind, the apostle is writing to a young leader. Timothy needed to learn yet that there is a time for confrontation and a time for not wasting one’s time in argument.

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The Jewish religious leaders once asked the Lord Jesus to disclose the authority by which He was working (Matt. 21:23). He had already answered that question repeatedly, e.g., “the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he sees the Father do....” (John 5:19 NKJV), but the religious officials were envious of One who obviously spoke with authority but was not part of their system. Elders in assemblies seeking to follow the New Testament pattern for church leadership often face the same question. If they had titles like “Reverend” or were identified with some large, well-known denomination, their authority to act would be assumed. But “laymen” who hold regular jobs and refer to one another as “brother”- how can such have “legitimate” authority?

The simple answer is, they cannot—that is, not in this world’s system. Nor have they any desire for it, because He Who sent them said clearly, “My kingdom is not of this world.” (John 18:36). The authority by which church elders serve is not of this world, and in fact, they weaken their God-given authority when they become entangled in this world’s power-politics. Yet because of the temptations of the flesh, we must clearly identify dangers and necessary safeguards in exercising true spiritual authority. Let’s consider some of these.

### Dangers

It is a serious mistake for elders to think lightly of spiritual authority in the day to day workings of the church, as if they were powerless to act because they have no civil authority, and therefore their influence is limited merely to being good examples for the flock. Setting a godly example, to be sure, is certainly important, as Peter wrote to elders (I Pet. 5:3). We might call this the passive side of leadership. But there are also many active responsibilities of elders described in the New Testament which require the exercise of God-given authority. So maintaining a good balance between the active and passive aspects of leading is critical to a healthy church [For more on this, see “Elders: Active or Passive?” ESN 10:6]

The opposite danger is for elders to suppose there is no other authority outside of their own. It is true that in their own local work, they must have the final

word in the teachings and practice of the church. But they must not lose sight of the church at large - the “universal” aspect of which all local churches are a small part. The fact that local believers receive instruction from many sources beyond their own particular fellowship raises the important question of the nature of spiritual authority.

There is a spiritual authority that comes with time and experience in which God authenticates His servants in the body of Christ as trustworthy. Paul reminded Timothy that his heritage included truth doctrines and also the responsibility of “knowing from whom you have learned them” (II Tim. 3:14). Of course this does not mean the convictions of outsiders may be imposed upon the local church, but only that wise elders will be sensitive to the fact that spiritual authority is not isolated from, but consistent with, the truth of the one body (Eph. 4:4-6). They must remember that God has given instructions to all believer-priests, and has given them the authority to obey His word as they see it in matters of personal conduct, family issues and non-essential (“grey areas”) of the faith.

One other danger is for elders to suppose that having a plural leadership guarantees godly authority. Some brethren have scorned “clergy systems,” but don’t realize that they themselves may have become a “plural clergy” within their own assembly. The Biblical pattern is unquestionably plurality, and spiritual authority comes from obedience to all of Scripture, not just the truths concerning any particular form of church government.

### Safeguards

Much has been written about the importance of elders working among the believers (Acts 20:28; I Pet. 5:1,2) as well as being over them (I Thess 5:12) as servant leaders. The Lord admonished His apostles to refrain from taking religious titles, and to serve together as brethren under the one Master (Matt. 23:8-10). So we have expressions like “leading men among the brethren” (Acts 15:22). “And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me....” (Gal. 2:9), and “recognize those who labor among you...” (I Thes. 5:12). These all reflect the process of earned

respect and consequent approval rather than conferred ecclesiastical positions in the church.

As 2 Corinthians 10:18 states, “For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends.” It is God’s work to validate His servants and He will do this in His own time and way (see also 1Cor.11:19).

So the church and elders must be very careful in identifying those whom God has raised up and validated. There are practical implications concerning this, to which we now turn.

### Practical Suggestions for Elders Today

There are many ways in which church elders can imitate the spirit and manner of the apostles in their work today. Here are a few suggestions:|

- **Avoid defensive or protective attitudes and actions in the work.** When Joshua seemed to resent the apparent competition to Moses’ leadership by two men in the congregation of Israel, Moses humbly replied, “Are you zealous for my sake? Oh that all the LORD’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!” (Num. 11:29). Moses’ approach was more on the meek side.

When God forewarned the church of a coming famine, He spoke through a man named Agabus (Acts 11:28). Who was Agabus when the well-known Paul and Barnabas were available? God is sovereign in His work through His people, and can use men other than the recognized leaders.

- **Confront problems rather than ignore them.** Over many years of listening to the concerns of people in struggling assemblies, no problem has been mentioned more often than the need for good, strong leadership that does not avoid problems. The Lord has provided men to shepherd His people, and He has given them the authority to feed, to lead, to protect and to oversee. Elders, as men of faith, must rely on the authority given to them by the Word of God and the Spirit of God to face every situation devised by the adversary.

- **Watch your terminology.** There is something refreshing about great servants of the Lord who are content to be known simply as brother or sister. Even the Savior seemed to prefer the more humble expression “Son of Man,” to “Son of God.” Remember that Scripture never uses spiritual

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What exactly is an elder's wife? If you asked the people in your congregation, I am sure you would get a variety of answers. Some would say she should be a quiet, modest, hard worker, willing to do anything, never irritated, a Sunday School teacher, a women's Bible Study leader, hospitable, a great cook, a good listener, her children should never run in church and it is helpful if she can play the piano. In other words an elder's wife should be a wonder woman. Now that's a lot of pressure!

Those of us who have the privilege of being married to men that have been called to shepherd God's people know that we can never live up to all of these expectations. Over the years I have seen a variety of ways women in this position respond to this pressure.

Some become disconnected; others develop defensiveness or discontentment; but praise God some have learned contentment.

Disconnecting is a way to avoid the problems and stresses. 1 Peter 1:22 reminds us of the spiritual purification that comes as we learn to love those in our fellowship "deeply from the heart." Adopting the attitude that "it isn't my problem" robs us of serving the Lord and the opportunity of growing in our faith.

Once while in a social setting with several elders and their wives, a woman in the group proudly stated she never got involved in her husband's work as an elder. In fact, she didn't think it was any of her business. I understand that much of an elder's work is confidential. Yet in many situations we can be a valuable encouragement and help to our husbands as we serve God's people together. To disconnect will ultimately cause us to drift in our relationship to our brothers and sisters in Christ and the very person God has declared us to be with.

Defensiveness so easily raises its ugly head as we feel the need to shield our husbands or ourselves. Lately the Lord has been pointing out to me that in many situations I do not have all the information that is pertinent to the problem. It has been embarrassing and humbling to realize how quickly I come to a conclusion and become defensive. It may be an unkind comment or attitude that puts me on edge. At times elders need to make decisions that people may not fully understand or agree with. This requires trust on our part and a patience with those who have a hard time accepting this leadership. Proverbs 15:1 reminds us that a soft answer turns away wrath.

Discontentment is woven into the culture of our society. We are constantly

being told we need what we do not have. As leaders' wives we can easily experience a longing for situations or things God has not seen fit to give us. It is encouraging to know that the great apostle Paul learned contentment (Phil 4:11). With time and God's help we too can be like Paul, and learn contentment.

Contentment frees us up to be used by God regardless of the people or the circumstances we find ourselves in. 1 Timothy 6:6 tells us that "godliness with contentment is great gain." Lasting contentment cannot survive on its own; it must be accompanied by godliness. A woman devoted to knowing her God will, in troubled times, fall back on His character. She will be confident that He is completely trustworthy and is in sovereign control. As a wise woman once told me "keep short account with your God and spend time discovering Him in His Word."

How do you handle being an elder's wife? Reject the temptation to be disconnected, defensive or discontented, but rather choose the path of learning godliness with contentment.



## The Authority of the Elders (cont. from page 2)

gifts as religious titles. In the same vein, "pastor" is one of many valuable gifts in the church, but we have no authority for using it as a religious title.

Likewise, it is fitting to speak of "the Lord's people" rather than "my people." Some will probably see this as hair-splitting, but using words carefully can help us battle the natural inclination of the flesh to control others.

**- Check your decision-making process.** Has the elders' meeting become a closed-door session - something exclusive where all assembly decisions are made and later communicated to the waiting flock? Or are church decisions made having listened to the people, and so far as is possible, *involving* them in the decision making process? This is an important part of discipleship, and wise elders know that men's meetings and even congregational

meetings can instill a sense of ownership in the work among the Christians. It's a good sign when elders take advantage of any available godly wisdom for input and counsel.

**- Equip the younger.** When elders take along young men on visitations to the saints, when they help a young brother prepare a message and ask the believers to support and encourage him by giving careful attention to his ministry, when those who have served well as deacons or in other capacities are invited to sit in on elders meetings, it is a healthy sign for the church.

**- When dealing with thorny problems, don't reinvent the wheel.** Vast treasures of wisdom and experience are available through all sorts of literature, conferences, gifted speakers and servants who have already worked through the

same issues you may be facing. We must not so emphasize the autonomy of the church that we destroy the equally important inter-dependence which marks the "one body" of Christ. We need not agree with other Christians in every detail to learn from them! It is no mark of weakness to be teachable.

There are many other creative and practical ways in which elders can resist the temptation to become spiritual power-brokers. But more than any method, this matter is first of all a question of the heart. We cannot do better than to desire that the mind of Christ be formed in us. He "being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation taking the form of a bondservant...." (Phil. 2:6,7).



## Foundation for Serving *(cont. from page 1)*

### Real life examples (6-9)

Paul now gives some specific examples of this “end times” character as it relates to those who have given into “various impulses.” Some false teachers were taking advantage of women weakened by sinfulness. He speaks as though this were a not-uncommon problem. These women were caught up in the activity of learning, without the ultimate goal of *actually* learning—and thus were a ready audience for anyone looking for a following. Ruthless, false teachers slip in, and through deceptive messages, capture the minds of such individuals and get what they want—namely a following. The sad irony is that in Christ we have the truth, yet weak individuals are kept leaning toward the false teachers, always searching for truth, and never finding it!

Paul refers to examples from the time of Moses, Jannes and Jambres (vss. 8-9), men whose names are not actually found in the OT record, but who are generally assumed to be two of the Egyptian “magicians.” These men resisted Moses and attempted to duplicate the plagues of Egypt, apparently to gain over the followers of Moses. Paul likens them to the false teachers of the “last days” that slip in and draw people away. This is no small comparison—such is the serious-

ness of their behavior.

Today this can be seen in the proliferation of televangelists who have little accountability, but enjoy huge sums of money coming in from people who are easily led astray by deceptive teachings. This may also happen through door-to-door purveyors of the cults or free literature left inside front doors. Elders need to warn people of these dangers. But, it can also occur when gifted individuals within the church begin to glory over those who hang on their eve-

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ry word. Nothing is worse than a pride of giftedness that requires increasing amount of fame or following.

### Call To Continue Faithfully (10-15)

Timothy, on the other hand, is commended for following the pattern of Paul, which is delineated in nine ways. The young protégé was modeling his character after Paul. See Philippians 2:20 where Paul commends him: “*But you know of his proven worth, that he served with me in the furtherance of the gospel like a child serving his father.*”

Like father, like son, as the saying goes. And that character holds fast even in times of persecution. Timothy saw the reality of Paul’s desire, “*that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death...*” (Phil 3:10). Persecution brings out one’s character. Timothy adopted Paul’s character as his own. What a mentor! What a student! So Paul simply encourages Timothy to continue on in his spiritual growth.

As elders, we need to continue

growing in our spiritual character so that the charge of false teachers who prey upon the weak will not be laid at our feet. We need to be men of character, who can spot the foul order of the character of false teachers and protect the

flock of God from falling headlong into the spiritual mud of error. 

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