

3 Principles in Relating to Pastors

1 Timothy 5:17-25

By Kevin W. Bounds

Imagine you're the CEO of a multimillion-dollar shoe company, and you decided to take your shoes to global market. How would you do this? More than likely, you would hire the best designers and engineers to create an even more stellar product. You would employ the best marketing and sales team to come up with television ads, social media campaigns, and billboards for visibility. You would even get famous celebrities and athletes to be brand ambassadors to promote your shoes. You would want the best of the best representing your brand, right?

And even with all that, reaching the entire world would be a daunting task.

But what if I told you that God has given His Church an even greater mission?

Jesus has entrusted His Church with the message of the gospel and commanded us to take the message to *all* nations. However, God chose to employ ordinary men and women for the job. Fisherman, tax collectors, former persecutors, and even you and I, people by the world's standards are not very impressive to make up his ambassador team, the Church (1 Cor. 1:28; 2 Cor. 5:20)!

This is why 1 Timothy 5 is so important. Earlier in this letter from the Apostle Paul to Timothy, he explained that the Church was the household of God, the assembly (or church) of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth, and he wanted Timothy to know how he should conduct himself in God's family gatherings (1 Tim. 3:14-15). That's a great privilege and responsibility!

In 1 Timothy 5:17-25, Paul is writing to Timothy about the men who have been entrusted with leading the Church – the elders. Notice what Paul is doing. He's teaching Timothy how he is to behave toward the people God has entrusted with representing Christ and leading His church.

That's why Paul says, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor." He tells Timothy to protect them from unfounded accusations. He tells him to confront them when

they sin. He tells him not to show partiality. He tells him not to appoint people hastily. In other words, because these ordinary men have been entrusted with an extraordinary responsibility, Timothy must treat them with extraordinary care.

This leads us to the central question of this passage: How should we treat and behave towards ordinary men whom God has appointed as leaders of His church? In this sermon, we will examine three principles of how we are to treat and behave towards pastors.

I. Faithful pastors should be respected and receive pay (vv. 17-18).

First, Paul writes, “The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor... (v. 17a). The elders (Gr. *presbyteroi*) here are leaders elected or appointed over an assembly of believers, not simply those men who are mature in age. These are the men Paul gave the qualifications for in 3:1-7. The terms overseer/bishop (Gr. *episkopos*), elder (Gr. *presbyteros*), and pastor/shepherd (Gr. *poimen*) are closely related, and refer to the same leadership role in the New Testament Church. Elder would be the office, overseer and pastor would be functions of that office, emphasizing the leading and the feeding of the church respectively.

Second, observe that the church is led by a plurality of elders in this verse. The New Testament consistently presents plurality of elders, not a solitary pastor. Paul appoints elders in every church (Acts 14:23), and he tells Titus to appoint elders in every city (Titus 1:5), never a single elder per congregation. Yet plurality doesn’t mean uniformity of influence. Among the Twelve, Peter, James, and John clearly carried more weight than the others (Gal. 2:9), and within the Jerusalem elders, James appears to speak with particular influence in Acts 15:13-21. This suggests a healthy eldership isn’t a group of interchangeable equals, but a team where one voice may carry more experience, gifting, and respect, while decisions and accountability remain shared. The danger to guard against isn’t one elder having more influence – that seems to have been normal – but one elder acting unilaterally, without the checks and balance the plurality was designed to provide.

Even in this verse alone, the equal authority but varying influence over the congregation is implied by those “who rule well” and “especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching” (v. 17). I’m not convinced that this distinction means there is two types of elders “ruling” and “teaching,” for the qualifications of any elder is to be “able to teach” (3:2). However, an elders teaching ministry may not involve the entire congregation like that of the main teaching elder/pastor – or the modern position of senior pastor. An elder can teach in small groups or one on one and still fulfill the requirements of the position. With this understanding of the biblical office of elder, let us move forward to Paul’s admonitions.

Pastors (elders) who “rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor” (v. 17). First, to “rule well” means to be good leaders. The phrase “rule” (Gr. *prosestotes*) means to lead, rule over, or

manage the affairs of the local congregation. This fits the qualification Paul set forth in 1 Tim. 3:4-5 to be able to manage his own household.

Next, what does it mean to be “worthy of double honor” (v. 17)? The word “honor” (Gr. *times*) connotes both reverence and remuneration. Therefore, pastors who are good leaders should be considered worthy of respect and compensation for their work (see 1 Th. 5:12).¹ Not only are those that lead well to be respected and receive payment, but “especially” (Gr. *Malista*, meaning to a greater degree), those who “work hard” (Gr. *kapiantes*, meaning to do wearisome labor or labor unto extreme fatigue) in preaching (Gr. *logo*) and teaching (Gr. *didaskalia*).

The KJV translates this as “especially they who labor in the word and doctrine.” The church, the Body of Christ, is guided by sound doctrine or good theology. Both of which, take tremendous amounts of time to make certain it is being applied correctly into the current context. As the church’s doctrine goes, so the church’s direction goes! A pastor’s work is extremely important! It is not something a person should take lightly (see James 3:1).

Finally, Paul supports his command for “double honor” by Scripture. He writes, “For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,’ and ‘the laborer is worthy of his wages.’” Here he is first quoting Deuteronomy 25:4, which gives the agrarian image all his audience would understand, but may be lost on a modern audience. Next, he quotes Jesus from Luke 10:17 and Matt. 10:10.²

But wasn’t Paul a tentmaker? Yes, but that was his strategic missional choice (see 1 Cor 9:1-14). And for many pastors, bivocational ministry is a choice (or even the only option.) Paul plainly states, “So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel” (1 Cor. 9-14). Faithful (or good) pastors should be respected and receive pay. There is a difference in a church that cannot compensate and a congregation that refuses to honor their pastors.

Imagine a family business where the owner tells one employee, “You are responsible for keeping this business running. You need to lead the staff, train people, solve problems, meet with customers, and make sure everything gets done.”

But then at the end of the month, the owner says, “*We’re not going to pay you because you should be grateful for the opportunity.*” The church should never view pastoral ministry as less deserving of support simply because it is ministry. Spiritual work is still work, and faithful labor deserves appropriate honor. Faithful pastors should be respected and receive payment for their work.

¹ 1 Thes. 5:12 – “But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction.” (NASB95)

² Paul’s use of these together show that early believers were already viewing the Gospels as Scripture and equal in authority to the Old Testament.

Or think about a football coach. The coach doesn't simply show up on Sunday and call plays. He studies film, develops a game plan, trains players, corrects mistakes, encourages people, and leads the team. And the better the coach does his job, the more the organization recognizes his value.

However, don't make the pastors earn your respect! Sometimes churches subconsciously treat the pastor like an employee who must continually prove his worth. *We'll honor him if the attendance grows. We'll appreciate him if everyone likes the sermon. We'll support him if he does everything the way we want.* Faithful pastors should be respected and receive pay.

Here are some questions to ask yourself: When was the last time you thanked your pastor specifically for his preaching? Do you pray regularly for your pastor? Do you encourage him when you see God using his ministry? Do you speak well of him when he's not present? Do you support the church's leadership when decisions are made biblically (see Heb. 13:17)?³

Pastors have great responsibilities in caring for God's people. Although as a pastor, I find it difficult to say aloud for fear of sounding self-serving, they should be honored as gifts from God (see Eph. 4:12). These great responsibilities lead to real dangers and reasons for accountability, which is what Paul addresses next.

II. Pastors should be protected, but held accountable (vv. 19-21)

First, Paul writes, "Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses" (v. 19). Since pastors have a very public ministry that deals directly with often sensitive issues in people's lives, they are prone to false allegations – whether these are from miscommunication or malicious attacks the principle Paul lays forth applies. Pastor should be protected from false allegations.

The phrase "an accusation" (Gr. *kategorian*) means a formal charge of wrongdoing. Paul put into practice the biblical principle of having sufficient evidence to be presented in any case of wrongdoing. The Bible repeatedly establishes the need for two to three witnesses (Gr. *Martyron*) (see Deut. 17:6; 19:15; Matt 18:16; 2 Cor. 13:1).⁴ Pastors should be protected from baseless allegations and sufficient evidence should be given for the claim. Christ gives us a procedure for church

³ Heb. 13:17 – "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you." (NASB95)

⁴ Deut. 17:6 – "On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness. Deut. 19: 15 – "A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he committed; on the evidence of two to three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed." Matt. 18:16 – "But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two to three witnesses every fact may be confirmed." 2 Cor. 13:1 – "This is the third time I am coming to you. Every fact is to be confirmed by the testimony of two to three witnesses."

discipline in Matthew 18:15-17. However, the modern church has failed to implement this practice to its own disgrace.

For illustration, I've known pastors that have lost their ministries due to baseless lies. I've seen a woman spurned by the pastor accuse him of misconduct, and in the court of public opinion he was guilty. Until one day, when in a court of law, the woman admitted she had lied. It behooves the church to hear the whole matter and have sufficient evidence before receiving accusations against an elder (Pro. 18:13). Pastors should be protected from false allegations.

Imagine someone comes to you and says, "I heard the pastor did something terrible." If you immediately believe it, repeat it, or begin making decisions based on it, you can destroy someone's reputation without ever establishing whether the accusation is true. In today's world, social media is a cesspool of allegations. Before the facts are known, people begin sharing it, commenting, and forming opinions. By the time the truth comes out, the damage may already be done. Paul is telling Timothy not to do that. The church must never allow hearsay, gossip, suspicion, or personal resentment to become the basis for condemning an elder. An accusation is not the same as evidence. Pastors should be protected from false allegations.

Sometimes the accusation isn't completely fabricated. It's born out of hurt or disagreement. Someone doesn't like a decision the pastor made, so they begin collecting grievances: "He said this...", "She told me he did this...", or "I've always thought there was something wrong with him..." One complaint becomes five, and suddenly a pastor is being judged by a collection of unverified stories.

Personal disappointment does not automatically constitute biblical grounds for accusation. We need to distinguish between "I don't like what happened" and "There is credible evidence of sinful or disqualifying behavior."

Before repeating something about a pastor (or anyone) ask: *Do I know this is true? Did I actually witness it? Is there credible evidence? Have I spoken to the appropriate person? Am I helping resolve the problem, or spreading it?* Don't use your mouth to do what Paul forbids the church to do.

However, never turn this into "protect the pastor at all costs." Paul doesn't say, "Never accuse an elder." He says, "Do not receive an accusation... except on the evidence of two or three witnesses." The principle is not to protect the pastor from criticism. Its pastors need to be protected from false claims but are held accountable for their behavior. The idea of accountability is what we turn to now in v. 20.

Second, Paul writes, "Those who continue to sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning" (v. 20). Paul commands Timothy to "rebuke" (Gr. *elenche*, meaning to sternly admonish) those who are proven to be in sin. This rebuke is to be public, so as to set an example for the entire church. The NLT is useful here. It reads, "Those who sin should be reprimanded in front of the whole church; this will serve as a strong warning to others." We see Paul

practicing this in Gal. 2:14 and admonishing the practice of godly confrontation in Gal. 6:1-3. Both of which follow the procedure for church discipline (see Matt. 18:15-17).

Next, Paul writes, “I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality” (v. 21). The importance of following these principles is seen in the nature of Paul’s words “I solemnly charge” (Gr. *diamartyromai*), which is often used in grave matters of importance. Paul calls all of heaven to bear on the matter. It is to be done without “bias” (Gr. *prokrima*) meaning a judgement reached before the evidence is available or “partiality” (Gr. *proklisis*) meaning a partiality that prevents objective consideration of an issue or situation. Church discipline, especially involving elders, is too important to be rushed, but also too important to be ignored from favoritism. Pastors should be protected from false allegations but held accountable for their proven actions. Finally, with all that we have explored, we come naturally to the idea of selecting elders, which Paul addresses next.

III. Pastors should not be ordained too quickly (vv. 22-25).

Paul writes, “Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thereby share responsibility for the sins of others” (v. 22a). The laying on of hands is a biblical practice of publicly identifying, affirming, and commissioning someone for ministry (Num. 27:18–23; Acts 6:5–6; 13:2–3; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22). In ordination, it signifies the church’s recognition of a person’s calling and qualifications and its commissioning of him to serve.

Paul is telling Timothy to proceed with patience when it comes to selecting men to lead the church of God. The word “hastily” (Gr. *tacheos*) means cursorily or without taking pains to consider. Overseeing, leading, and feeding the flock purchased by God’s only begotten Son is far too important to rush the process. Pastors should not be ordained too quickly!

Paul gives the reason why when he writes, “and thereby share responsibility for the sins of others...” (v. 22b). The person who ordains must consider the decision carefully. The Greek word translated “share responsibility” (Gr. *koinoneo*) in v. 22 carries the sense of becoming a participant in—or implicated in—the sins of those ordained. Overseers must meet specific qualifications including being above reproach, temperate, respectable, not conceited, and having a good reputation outside the church (see 1 Tim. 3:1-7). Ordaining someone who lacks these qualities doesn’t merely damage Timothy’s credibility; it compromises the church’s witness and makes the ordaining leader complicit in whatever failures follow. Paul admonishes Timothy to “keep (Gr. *tere*) yourself free from sin (Gr. *hagnos*),” meaning to be above reproach or fault.

Paul further explains the reason for patience in vv. 24-25. He writes, “The sins of some men are quite evident going before them to judgment; for others their sins follow after. Likewise, also, deeds that are good are quite evident, and those which are otherwise cannot be concealed” (vv.24-25). The key phrase in both verses is the words “quite evident” (Gr. *prodeloi*), which means clearly revealed to

the mind or the senses. There are times when you think you truly know a person, but they surprise you. It takes time to truly understand a person's character and to see if they meet the qualifications to lead God's people. A quick survey can reveal men that everyone admired, to be woefully unqualified to hold the office of pastor. Pastors should not be ordained too quickly.

In an interview, the now 90-year-old Chuck Swindoll, was asked if he would have done anything differently in his ministry? His response was telling. He said that he would have taken more time in selecting leaders. Current pastors can be pressured to appoint leaders but later regret those choices. It's always important to know that the enemy pushes, but the Spirit leads.

Paul is talking about appointing/recognizing church leaders. The laying on of hands represents public identification and commissioning. Therefore, the church should not ordain simply because someone: feels called, has theological education, is gifted at preaching, is popular, or has an urgent ministry opportunity.

Churches should build an intentional period of examination before ordination. A church should ask: *Does he meet the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1? Is his doctrine sound? Is his marriage and family life healthy? Does he demonstrate spiritual maturity? Is he already serving faithfully? Do other mature believers recognize his calling? Is there evidence that he can actually shepherd people? Has his character been tested over time? Don't ordain potential; examine proven character.*

Before concluding, I want to address v. 24. Paul writes, "No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments" (v. 24). Paul instructs Timothy to cease drinking water exclusively (Gr. *hydropotei*) and instead use wine (Gr. *oinos*) moderately for his stomach and frequent ailments. The phrase "frequent ailments" suggests Timothy was experiencing ongoing physical problems, not merely occasional discomfort. Given that Timothy held a demanding pastoral position in Ephesus, tasked with instructing men against false teachings (1:3), the weight of these responsibilities would have been considerable.

It's very possible that the nature of Timothy's ailments points toward conditions exacerbated by stress. Managing a church while combating false doctrine, maintaining spiritual authority despite his youth, and bearing the emotional burden of pastoral care would create significant physical strain. Ancient medical understanding recognized that psychological and emotional pressures manifested in digestive and stomach problems. Wine, in ancient context, was understood to have medicinal properties and could aid digestion while also providing some relief from the anxiety accompanying such demanding work. Elsewhere, even Paul mentioned the stress of caring for the church (2 Cor. 11:28). A call to follow Christ, especially pastoral ministry, is a call to die, to lay your life down for others.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Paul instructions give us three main principles that answer the question, how should we treat and behave towards ordinary individuals whom God has appointed as representatives of Christ and leaders of His church? 1) The church should respect and compensate faithful pastors. 2) The church should protect pastors from baseless claims but hold them accountable for their behavior and actions. 3) The church should practice patience in ordaining future pastors.

We have discussed how we should relate to the elders God has placed among us. But I want you to remember that every pastor is an imperfect man. Pastors need grace. Pastors need accountability. Pastors will sometimes fail. And that is why your ultimate hope cannot be in a pastor, a church, or any other person. Your hope must be in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the perfect Shepherd who never fails His sheep. He is the Good Shepherd who said, “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep” (John 10:11). He didn't simply lead us; He died for us. He took our sin upon Himself, died on the cross, and rose again so that sinners like us could be forgiven and reconciled to God.

So today, if you have never trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior, I want you to understand that Christianity isn't ultimately about finding the perfect church or the perfect pastor. It's about finding the perfect Savior. Jesus Christ is the Shepherd your soul needs. He calls you to turn from your sin, trust in Him, and follow Him. And if you are His sheep, then keep your eyes on Him. I will disappoint you. Your church may disappoint you. You may even disappoint yourself. But Jesus will never fail His sheep. If God is speaking to your heart today, don't resist His call. Come to Christ. Trust the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for you and rose again.

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