

## Accusations Against Elders

1Timothy 5: [17] “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine. [18] For the scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The labourer is worthy of his reward. [19] Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses. [20] Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear. [21] I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality.”

In this short passage the Apostle Paul is instructing the young minister, Timothy, in practical matters regarding the respectful treatment of elders. It is clear from the context that the elders under consideration are not “the elderly” with respect to age, but rather ministers of the gospel. Just a few statements earlier, in Chapter 4, Paul instructs Timothy, as a young minister, to be an example of the believers in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, and in purity. I would like to consider Verse 19 in the above passage in conjunction with the Apostle’s exhortation for the minister of the gospel to be the example.

Paul says, in effect, that an accusation against an elder should not be received without two or three witnesses. To make an accusation against anyone is, of course, serious business. God makes it clear in the Proverbs, in James’ Epistle, and in other places that the tongue is a powerful instrument and can be used for good or for evil. We ought to be all the more careful, then, to have as many facts as possible before expressing a position on an issue when it concerns the actions or words of other people. “He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him.” {Pr.18:13} The word “heareth” in this sense indicates understanding. In our passage, the word “witnesses” is used in a legal sense, meaning one who can affirm what he himself has seen or heard; or one who can avow by some other means the truth of a matter. So, before an accusation is made, there must be as much understanding of the situation as possible and there must be evidence supporting the accusation; otherwise the accusation must not be made. If it is made, without supporting evidence, the situation turns into foolishness and the accuser brings shame upon himself. These are Biblical admonitions to be observed by everyone in all situations where there is potential for disagreements to arise.

Paul, however, is addressing a specific situation. He says, “against an elder...” Why is Paul dealing with accusations made against elders in particular? Are elders above wrongdoing? No! Is the gospel minister above reproach? As much as we would like to be, we are not! Why, then, does Paul address a specific situation where accusations might be made against an elder?

When a man is ordained to the ministry, he is supposed to have met certain qualifications and he is supposed to possess certain characteristics. He must be sober, of good behavior, no striker, patient, not a brawler, and he must have a good report of those in close proximity but outside the church (1Tim.3:1-7). A minister must not strive. He must be gentle unto all men and he must be able to instruct others with meekness (2Tim.2:24-26). The man who has been ordained to the ministry has been given a beautiful gift of the Spirit but he has also been given a daunting responsibility. How crucial it is to the cause of Christ that every gospel preacher set the example for other believers in all situations; not only with respect to fundamental doctrine but also in how they interact with people.

In Verse 17 of our passage, Paul refers to “the elders that rule well”. We know Scripture teaches us that ‘the rule’ to be followed is God’s word. Elders are said to ‘rule’ in the sense of oversight and they do so primarily in two ways: leadership and example. They not only “say”; they also “do”. If what the elder says matches what he does, and both correspond with God’s word, the elder does indeed “rule well”. The elder who rules well, by leadership and example, laboring in the word and doctrine, Paul says should be “counted worthy of double honour”. There is a certain respect due the gospel minister who continues to pursue his noble calling of God in an honorable manner harmonious with God’s word. It is this due respect, which Paul describes, that requires caution to be exercised if an accusation against the elder is made. An accusation, whether intentional or not, often calls into question the character of the one being accused. In the case of an elder, his character is a vital element of that which qualifies him to

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hold the position he is in and which allows him to remain in that position. To make an accusation against an elder, then, could call into question his qualifications as a minister of the gospel. There may be times that such a thing is warranted but it is always a serious matter indeed.

Paul's admonition requires that there be clear and sufficient evidence of the accusation against an elder before it is to be received by another. Notice... Paul made no exceptions based on the source of the accusation, the nature of the accusation, or anything else. Another man cannot set himself up above the requirements of this admonition simply because of his own position, his perceived influence, or simply because he speaks louder than anyone else in the room. In other words, in the situation Paul here describes, the reliability of the accuser and the grounds of the accusation must first be proved before it is to be entertained by anyone as being possibly true. Again, this is the case regarding the faithful minister of God's word. There are, from time to time, situations that involve ministers who have failed in their commitment to godly principles and moral convictions. Paul is not dealing with those ministers in this passage.

It is especially grievous and harmful to the cause of Christ if accusations are made within the ministry and these principles are not heeded. If one minister makes a statement against another, Biblical principles require that minister to provide evidence to support his accusation. Simply because the accuser is a minister does not exempt that man from this requirement. This is where the critical nature of gospel ministers being examples is most evident. We expect others to follow the word we preach. Are others also able to follow the example we teach? If people observe a preacher tossing accusations around with no evidence, will they not also begin to do the same? Or they will assume since their favorite preacher is making the accusation, he must have some evidence to support it; therefore, they will begin to repeat the same accusation publicly, not realizing it is entirely without basis.

Paul actually deals with both sides of this kind of situation in verse 20. It may be that sufficient evidence is given to support an accusation against an elder. If that elder is found to be in the wrong, he should be rebuked in the presence of all those directly involved in the matter. Those who have brought truthful witness against him can be satisfied that the matter is now being resolved. They do not have to perpetuate the accusation or the evidence in other circles, unless absolutely necessary. The elder who has done wrong will be 'rebuked before all' who have been affected by the wrong doing. On the other hand, what if the accuser has been found to be a false accuser? He, too, then should be rebuked before all those in whose presence he has made the false accusation. If the accuser is truly willing to walk according to the Spirit, he will confess his mistake, repent of his sin, and willingly accept the rebuke. He will go back and set the record straight to the very best of his ability, if he desires to be found walking in a manner pleasing to the Lord.

Paul cannot emphasize the seriousness of these things any stronger than by saying "I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality" (v.21). Can we stand before Almighty God and before our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and acknowledge, without hesitation and without reservation, that we have faithfully obeyed God's word in these matters? Such will manifest itself in due time. Let us not be false witnesses or sowers of discord. These things, God hates. May we humbly bow before Him in true repentance and seek to glorify His name and His name alone.

In Christ,  
Matt Jordan