

ELDER, please step down, now.

When should a church leader resign his post?

Phil Myers, PhD

- *Are the guidelines in I Timothy 3 mandates, suggestions, or goals to attain?*
- *Why is leadership in the church such a sacred trust?*
- *Why doesn't God remove present day church leaders the way He took out Moses,*
- *What is the church's role in asking erring elders to leave office?*

There is a time when an otherwise qualified, godly man must relinquish the responsibilities of leading the church. There are biblical reasons for elders to step down. The mandates mentioned in the books of Timothy and Titus are binding. They are not optional. They are not goals for the elders to strive toward. They are qualities which are to be characteristic of those on whom hands are laid. The integrity of the church is important to our Heavenly Father.

Guiding God's people is a sacred trust. Moses serves as one of our Lord's most vivid illustrations of the import which God places upon those whom He would allow to lead. We have all struggled just a bit with God's decision to disallow Moses to enter the Promised Land over such a seemingly "insignificant" sin. After all, we ask ourselves, weren't some of Moses' other flaws just as glaring as banging on a rock?

And so the argument develops that it is not as though God has never chosen to use filthy instruments to accomplish His purposes, so what's the big deal of using a guy whose temper is out of control? What about Samson, Solomon, Saul, Manasseh, Jeroboam, some of the high priests, Ahab, and even David from Bathsheba onward?

Through the OT as well as during the first generation of the church, the Lord handpicked His own leaders. But with the advent of the church He assigned the choosing of elders to fallible human beings. He left us with a selection process that He felt was sufficient for us to make wise choices. We must not fail Him.

15 qualifications in I Timothy 3.1-5

This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. 2 A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach; 3 Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; 4 One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; 5 (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) 6 Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. 7 Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. KJV

It is a trustworthy statement, if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine works he aspires to do. 2 An overseer then must be above reproach; the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach; 3 Not addicted to wine, or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money; 4 He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity; 5 (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?) 6 and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the Devil. 7 And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church; so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. NASB

ABOVE REPROACH, BLAMELESS

I agree with those who consider the words “above reproach” to be the heading of this paragraph concerning the requirements of elders, and the following description of distinctives to be rendered as subpoints which define this item.

What does it mean to be above reproach? It certainly doesn't mean sinlessly perfect, but it does carry the awesome responsibility of living in such a way that no one in the community may cast criticism on the Name of the Lord Jesus. “It means to have nothing in one's conduct on which someone could ground a charge or accusation.” [*Bible Knowledge Commentary, NT, p. 736*]

Most of us know men in our communities who have this kind of reputation. Their marriages are on track, their kids are respectful, they are honest at work, they aren't angry guys, and so on. Even people who don't like their religious slant are willing to admit they are fine men. These are the ones Paul is singling out as fit for leading the church. They are blameless in the community as well as in the church.

Above reproach means blameless, inculpable, unimpeachable, not subject to blame; as in “an unimpeachable reputation.” “Above reproach” eliminates the qualifiers “He's a good man *but*. . .he's got a short fuse; *but*...his kids are out of line; *but*. . . he's got a mean streak; *but*. . .he's divorced, *but*. . .I wouldn't hire him; *but*. . .”

We recall Moses was set aside “because you have not believed Me to treat Me as holy. . . .” [*Numbers 20.12*] This is not about forgiveness, but it is about consequences. [George Pytlik www.pytlik.com].

No one in the community can point a finger at an area of his life and declare him unfit for a position of leadership in the local church.

Perhaps Paul's standard of excellence for elders is not exhaustive; but it covers a man's life pretty thoroughly, doesn't it? Marriage, attitudes, ability to teach, the man's wallet, and his hospitality.

And even his kids! Only three of the items on Paul's list have any explanation. This one comes in the form of a question. If he doesn't know how to guide his kids, “How will he know how to guide the church?” [I Timothy 3.5]

In the margin of my Bible I've written: “*He'll guide the church with American ingenuity, acumen, verve, zeal, intelligence, sincerity, human dynamics, principles of business leadership, manipulation, and even Bible verses; rather than the recumbent faith that he, himself, has passed the leadership test at home.*”

He failed to pass the torch!

In Paul's notes to Titus he drops in a couple additional requirements [Titus 1.6-9]: no short fuse, lover of good, not self-willed [*self centered?*], and self-disciplined [*this one probably covers overeating, taxes, zoning laws, and disobeying speed laws, I Peter 2.13,14*]. He even seems to indicate strongly that the man's kids ought to be believers. Then he expands his last point of an elder's teaching responsibilities with a whole paragraph [*vss. 10-16*] to explain how important the elder's ability to communicate must be. It seems to me that these men are entrusted with the duty to teach the church much of its doctrine. It was expected of these men that they would all be actively teaching Scripture, not just be apt or able to teach.

For years I pondered the mandate on hospitality. I came to a practical conclusion, though not a biblical tenet. Perhaps two groups need to have access to godly elders' homes more than others - unbelievers & new believers. Is elder hospitality God's way of allowing others to peek in the windows of strong, healthy, godly homes to learn how life really ought to be lived? May God bless the homes which have open hearts and open doors.

GOD IS HOLY, NOT JUST GOOD

There are at least seven lists of sins in Scripture. We remember “six things which the Lord hates” in Proverbs 6, and of course, the Ten Commandments; but the lists go on.

- Romans 1.28-32-the Terrible Twenty
- Galatians 5.19-21-the Filthy Fifteen
- II Timothy 3.1-5-the Awful Eighteen
- II Corinthians 12.20,21-Eight Christian Crimes
- Mark 7.21,22-Thirteen Evil Thoughts from the Hearts of Men

A quick glance at the things that grieve the heart of God shows that murder, sodomy, witchcraft, and malice are laid right alongside disobeying parents, unkindness, lying, gossip, being a prickly person, short flares of temper, and arguing.

If you and I categorized these we would tend to let a couple of them slide because they are so hard for us to root out of our own lives. The catholic church devised two categories of sins: mortal and venial [major & minor]. But if murder is such a *Big Sin*, why has it been so easy for me to stop? And if unkindness is a *Lesser Transgression*, why does it ride my back so long and so hard?

As humans we weigh the gravity of our sin according to the damage it does to others, but damage control is not a sliding scale to a holy God. Holiness has no grey areas. After all, how bad, really, was eating an apple in Adam’s own orchard? Black. True Black.

THERE ARE NO LITTLE SINS

I had a pastor who allowed an ongoing sin in his life. All I could figure was that his warped mind must have been rationalizing, “I am an impure vessel; but if God can use me a little bit, I am willing to serve Him.”

When witnessing, many of us have used the explanation, “If you were the only person in the world, Jesus would have died for you.” With all the wrong things in the world that have ever been committed, my sin or your sin perhaps constitutes only 1/1,000,000,000,000th of all sins in history; yet, you and I believe that one sin would have been grievous enough to cost the blood of the Savior. There are no little sins.

Condemnation of sin is an enormous part of the holiness of God. Peter reiterates a command delivered first in Leviticus, “Be holy for I am Holy” [I Peter 1.16]. If there was ever a place to raise the bar of holiness, it could certainly be with the selection of elders.

I was teaching First Timothy at a lay institute in a large church in south Florida when one of my students said, “I’ve never been in a church where there were this kind of leaders.” I was a little stunned, but I remember my response, “I’ve served as an elder in several churches and attended several others, and almost all those on the elder boards were this kind of men. The woods are full of them. Go find them.” I felt like adding, “or go find a church that already has them.”

Whether God has chosen to use unfit vessels in the past, it is not one of our options to appoint those to the eldership of the church who violate His direct, clear, and stringent qualifications. To do so, and make excuses for our churches’ disobedience, is sin.

We are responsible to our community to uphold the holiness of our Savior. No one will find fault with our churches if we allow the local drunk to attend our services if he’s seeking after God, but they will castigate us if we appoint him as a Sunday School teacher.

BUT GOD DIDN'T REMOVE SO AND SO

It is reasonable, of course, to ask the question, "Why should an elder in the church step down from a position of leadership for failure to maintain the requisites of I Timothy, when there doesn't seem to be a precedent of relinquishing authority throughout Scripture?" I'm afraid my comments on this may not seem convincing for some, but my response is simply - Scripture says he is not to serve. "An overseer, then, **MUST** be above reproach..." is clear enough.

Our Heavenly Father has not revealed all of His reasons. Sometimes He merely makes a statement.

MEN WHO ARE MATURE ALREADY

These are to be spiritually growing men.

We don't harness them to the plow and expect them to become strong enough to pull. We lay hands on them because they are already proven. A directive to the deacons could apply to elders as well. "Let these *[potential deacons]* also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons...[the job is for] those who have served well as deacons. . . ." [I Timothy 3.10 & 13]

"Someone who is not exceptionally hospitable isn't necessarily a bad or sinful person. They might just be an introvert. Someone who is not able to teach isn't necessarily sinning. Maybe they just don't feel confident enough to teach. They are good men, but they are not ready for the mantle of eldership to fall on their shoulders. The last two items in Paul's list to Timothy can't be sins! It certainly isn't a sin to be a recent convert. Failing these tests don't necessarily make us bad persons; yet someone who doesn't meet them has not demonstrated enough proof of character to qualify for the vital role of leading a church." George Pytlík [www.pytlik.com] But there is a waiting period until men have attained a level of maturity.

LET'S EXAMINE THE 15 INJUNCTIONS BRIEFLY

TIMOTHY & TITUS' LISTS

Tit 2:1 But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine: 2 That the aged men be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in patience. 3 The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; 4 That they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, 5 To be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed. 6 Young men likewise exhort to be sober minded. 7 In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, 8 Sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you. KJV

Spotting serious, ongoing violations

[it is assumed Matt 18 has been applied]

This list might be a rather homespun enumeration of opinions, but let it simply serve as a reference point for discussion. It is my understanding that the verses in I Timothy and Titus address lifestyle qualities. Discipline is not to be employed based on isolated incidents. Remember, blameless, not sinless.

An elder must relinquish his privilege to lead and step down voluntarily if he violates *any* of the following requisites. I've crunched some of the injunctions together.

- a. **One wife:** step down if:
 - remarried whether it occurred before or after salvation
 - recurrent sexual unfaithfulness, or porn addiction.

This is not a punishment, it is simply a consequence.

If theologians will do semantic gymnastics on this point, missing the spirit of the law, they will also convolute Scripture on other weightier matters of truth.

If it is widely known that a guy's marriage is on the rocks, somebody should love him enough to come alongside and tell him to step down until his home becomes an example to others. I know of friends who have stepped, and men who had to be lovingly encouraged to step.

nota bene: elders are to be male. If God wanted this statement to be genderless He could have said it without gender-specific words.

- b. **Temperate, prudent, & respectable:** [KJV - vigilant, sober, & of good behavior; ESV - sober-minded, self-control, & respectable; NIV - temperate, self-controlled, & respectable]: disqualified for disregarding self-control in any particular area of life, perhaps in such areas as obeying laws of the land, eating habits, spending, leisure, the tongue, slander, and so forth
- c. **Hospitable:** step down if unapproachable, inhospitable, cloistered, or entirely lacking in openness or transparency
- d. **Able to teach:** unsuited if without the ability to elucidate all the major doctrines of the church, unfamiliarity with the Word, unwillingness to teach
- e. **Not addicted to wine:**
no explanation needed
- f. **Not pugnacious, gentle & not contentious:**
violators are easy to recognize and men must opt out willingly
- g. **Free from the love of money:**
a tough one to describe, but his close friends should be able to help here
- h. **Manages household well:** long-term blatant violation of this is sufficient reason for removal, especially if there is resistance to counseling and advice; perhaps grown children out of the home are not in view here; it seems to indicate public behavior of kids still at home
- i. **Not a new convert:** In my opinion, it may take as few as three or four years [but not much less] to grow an elder from pagan stock, but certainly it doesn't normally take ten years for an eager novice to attain to the stature of a mature man.
- j. **Good reputation in the community:** check with his employer, neighbors, bank, unsaved relatives, and softball teammates if you have any questions.

n.b. I've been puzzled about God's reason for omitting some items from His catalog of conditions: generosity, diligence, prayerfulness, speeding tickets, wise decision making skills, organization, sports addiction, evangelism, etc. I am content His list explains His heart without mentioning others.

I SEE AT LEAST FOUR CONSEQUENCES OF NOT STEPPING DOWN

1. Staying will cause unbelievers to vilify the Name of the Lord.
2. Staying causes the enemies of God to despise the work of God.
3. Staying encourages the flock of believers to be soft on their own sins.
4. Continuing to serve sends a message to his family that he is a hypocrite.

Removal from leadership is not a punishment, it is a consequence. He can continue to serve in the church using his spiritual gift. Remember, gender is not a punishment just because women cannot serve as elders. It is simply God's choice.

And the reason God gives for disallowing women from teaching or being in authority over men rings with a peculiar sound. But God merely gives His reason, "for [because] . . . the woman being quite deceived fell into transgression." [1 Timothy 2.13,14]

That reason may not satisfy you, but it was all God felt He had to say.

WHEN IS IT TIME TO RESTORE HIM?

Just as Matthew 18 and 1 Cor 5 have restoration in view, asking an elder to step out of the spotlight has the restoration of the brother as its ultimate purpose. Let me suggest that he be restored as soon as possible.

While I was a student at Dallas Seminary, Dr. Ron Blue told me this story of a church planter in Central America. It is strange to our American ears, but severe steps were taken to prevent the Lord's name and ministry from slander.

A godly young man was inadvertently maligned by one of the women in his church. She meant no harm to him but a neighbor misunderstood a casual comment she made.

This single fellow had been sent to her community to teach a Bible study to begin to plant a church. He stopped outside of her home one day to talk to the woman who was attending the Bible study.

She happened to mention something her husband had done. [I've forgotten just what that was.] At any rate, the church planter spoke the following words which were later twisted by an unbelieving neighbor of the woman—

"If I were your husband," the single church planter said, "I think I would have done such and such. . . ."

Well, this member of his Bible study was talking to her neighbor later, and she quoted the young man, "If I were your husband, I think I would have done such and such. . . ."

Somehow the neighbor got the wrong sense and thought it sounded as though the young man was making inappropriate advances. Soon the church which had commissioned the young man heard that gossip had spread through the community and the reputation of the work was being besmirched.

Remember, this takes place in a culture different from ours, but because of their unwillingness to see the testimony of the work castigated, they approached the church planter and asked him to help restore the testimony of the church plant in that village. Although he was sad and confused, he was eager and readily submitted to the suggestion of the sending church.

Simply because the accusation seemed to show him not "above reproach" he was asked to leave the work in the hands of another church planter for the next year and return to the sending church. He followed the request of the leaders for a year before returning to the church plant. The community embraced him forgiving him of his perceived indiscretion.

Perhaps this story is an instance of what Peter means by being "reviled for the name of Christ." [1 Pet 4.14] At any rate, the church leaders felt it was wise to restore the church planter as a man who was "above reproach."

Even Rudyard Kipling got it right when he spoke to his son, "If you can bear to hear the things you've spoken, twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools." ["IF"]

Let me suggest several signs which signal the end of discipline.

- The healing process is obviously complete. True repentance is evident.
- Those outside the church [if pertinent] are willing to acknowledge a penitent heart. Go ask his boss, fellow employees, neighbors, relatives, unbelievers. A consensus, not unanimity is probably enough.
- The grip of sin has been soundly defeated. There is release from the weight. Reproach is gone. Joy has returned.
- In the case of divorce, wait for [I don't say pray for] the death of the former spouse.
- With rebellious kids, maybe waiting for them to marry is wise since it is child rearing which is in view in verse four.

THE MAN OF GOD IN HISTORY

Some of the blameless people in Scripture are so squeaky clean that their lives rebuke us constantly. Think of Mary, Daniel, Timothy, Titus, Abel, Enoch, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, Nehemiah, Elijah & Elisha, as well as the apostle John. But then there are those men and women of remarkable character who sought the Lord's forgiveness and were restored: Abraham, Peter, Adam, and David [*in his early life*] and of course, Josiah [*II Kings 23*].

It is easy to point to Israel's kingly failures, but don't lose sight of the fact that while there were thirteen evil kings in Judah and only eleven good kings, the evil ones only reigned for 179 years [*13 years avg.*] while God had good men steyed on the throne for 278 years [*25 years avg.*]. Yes, He does delight to bless those who honor Him.

NINE STEPS [*or less*] IN INVOLUNTARY REMOVAL & RESTORATION

Removing an elder who does not see his sins as others see them is simple but not easy.

1. Pray a lot.
2. Examine your own heart. [*Galatians 6.1*] You have been forgiven much, too.
3. Be encouraged that when Nathan rebuked David with, "Thou art the man!" David's heart shattered with true repentance.
4. Talk to him one-on-one [*Matthew 18.15 ff*] and win your brother. He may still need to step away from the office while he roots out the decay in his life.
I've had this conversation several times with different elders with good results as well as bad. It is no fun. But be encouraged that some are wise and feel a sense of relief that someone challenged them to do the biblical thing and step away.
5. If he won't listen or doesn't feel as strongly as you do about his "shortcomings," take one or two others. If you are hesitant about talking to them about the accusation lest you be guilty of gossip or slander, you don't necessarily have to tell them any details of your upcoming confrontation. Just tell them you'd like them to accompany you as you talk to the offender about an important matter.
I Timothy 5.19 tells us not even to listen to an accusation about an elder unless there are witnesses.
6. Give him a copy of this booklet.
7. Take the matter to the elders.
8. Let the matter be known to the church. Many churches have restored elders who got off track. It is a wonderful experience.
9. Be eager to restore him.

Blessings on your church leadership.

ADDENDUM

The record of the early church fathers pertaining to elders and remarriage.

In the first half of the 20th century the evangelical church leadership largely spoke with a united voice concerning remarriage of elders as well as the hoi-polloi.

Remarriage for elders was allowed in cases such as Joseph and Mary due to the fact that there seemed to be evidence of premarital sex; however, as the winds of social change began to blow, theologians wafted toward a new paradigm regarding remarriage.

Today it is hard to find a popular writer, or radio preacher, or megachurch pastor, or evangelical school which holds to the same theological position of just several generations ago.

The overwhelming majority of church theologians for the last 2,000 years have held to a different understanding than the church today.

I have been unable to find one writer in the first 300 years of the Church who allows remarriage for any reason except the death of a spouse.

Stephen W. Wilcox says the first writing Christians "were close to ground zero, at the very epicenter of

the Christian earthquake that shook the world.” In the early years of the church these men were in agreement that remarriage disqualified a man forever from serving in the office of elder.
[www.hoseaproject.com]

Hermes AD 90 - “divorcees should not remarry”

[*The Shepherd 4.1-10*]

Justin Martyr AD 151 - “a second marriage is sinning”

[*First Apology 15*] [a]

Clement of Alexandria AD 208 - never allows any release from the union while the mate is still alive

[*Miscellanies 2.23.145.3*] [a]

Origen AD 248 - “remarriage is adultery”

[*Commentaries on Matthew 14*] [a]

Basil the Great AD 375 - “marrying a divorcee is charged with adultery”

[*Amphilochius 199*] [a]

Ambrose AD 387 - “no second union is allowed while the first wife lives”

[*Commentary on Luke, sec. 8.5*] [a]

Jerome AD 396 - “cannot remarry during the life of former mate”

[*Letters 55,58*] [a]

Thomas Aquinas AD 1274 - while a husband is bound to divorce a wife who continuously commits adultery, he may not remarry

[*Summa Theologica 3:2794-98*]

I have not found one orthodox writer in the first four centuries who has concluded that Scripture approved of remarriage for any reason, save for the death of a spouse.

Conclusion: Why does God include “husband of one wife” in the list of injunctions anyway? And why does He list it first in both Timothy and Titus?

All Christians [100%] have always condemned the elder who was not a philanderer, not a “one-woman-man.” It seems as unnecessary to mention moral impurity as it does to include a directive like, “not a serial murderer.”

The standard of “husband of one wife” evidently does not merely address the requirement of marital faithfulness. I understand this, rather to focus on marriage itself. It carries far more weight than loyalty to a partner. John Piper argues that no divorce severs the bonds of marriage. Our marriages reflect Christ and His Church.

The metaphor given in Romans 7 is such a strong picture of Christ’s commitment to His bride. It is more a statement of our eternal security than it is a treatise about marital theology. But it is also clearly describes the indissolubility of human marriage.

Quotations are from the NASB unless otherwise noted.

A Note on Divorce

By the way, the bit about “husband of one wife” isn’t a phrase intended for examination with a magnifying glass in the pastor’s study, rather it is to be viewed with binoculars from a neighbor’s backyard. *Rom 7:2,3*

For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband.

So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man.

It puzzles many of us that God did not choose a less ambiguous phrase such as “not divorced;” but the majority opinion of church leaders for two thousand years, [up until the present generation] maintains that this phrase disqualifies those remarried *before* or after* salvation. It is interesting to note that as our society embraced divorce as an option, the church adopted a different slant on eldership and divorce.

If anyone knew what “husband of one wife” meant in the original language, the early church fathers did. These guys even dreamed in Greek. Later I’ll cite some of their manuscripts referring to remarriage, but you need to know they speak with one voice. [Addendum pp. 15 & 16]. “The most strict interpretation and the one common among the earliest commentators (2nd & 3rd centuries)...extends to any second marriage.” J. Hampton Keathley, III: *Instructions Concerning Elders in the Church*, [www.Bible.org]

The unusual phrase “husband of one wife” has its concomitant, “wife of one man” by the same author, Paul, in the same book [I Tim 5.9]. Those who would argue that this phrase implies polygamy would be hard pressed to demonstrate that polygamy of many husbands at the same time was as common as many wives of one husband. Reverse polygamy was anathema among Romans as well as Jews.

- *John the Baptist even applied the standards of the Mosaic Law to the unbeliever, Herod, when he condemned him for marrying his brother’s wife, Herodias.* Matthew 6.18

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