

Hiring and Firing Pastors

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²² Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people's sins; keep yourself pure. ²³ No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities. ²⁴ Some men's sins are clearly evident, preceding *them* to judgment, but those of some *men* follow later. ²⁵ Likewise, the good works of *some* are clearly evident, and those that are otherwise cannot be hidden. (1 Timothy 5:19–25)

In the last year or so, the number of high profile pastors or Christian teachers that have been disqualified, or asked to step down, is quite shocking. These are high profile names from the public's point of view, the Christian pastor it is in a crisis of credibility.

However, this crisis is not something that the Bible is shocked by. God's Word was prepared for this and has taught on this for as long as the Word has been there.

God is gathering a people for Himself and cares that they be protected from bad leadership. He is the Good and Great Shepherd and cares that His people be fed, nourished, and protected. He also loves and cares for those undershepherds. And so God has made sure that His Word speaks clearly on what good shepherds are, what bad shepherds are, and how churches can avoid having bad shepherds, and enjoy good shepherds.

The Book of First Timothy is the book where we can find those very things.

It's a manual on church life: how to order the church. It includes everything from the doctrine we should preach, to the way we should worship, to men and women's roles, to the qualifications of pastors and deacons, to whom the church should support financially, all the way to the hiring and firing of pastors.

Last week, we considered the verses which teach on remunerating pastors who labour in the word and doctrine. And as we studied that, perhaps we might be asking, does that mean pastors have a kind of a blank check to just stay in the ministry regardless, and get supported from the church's finances? What about bad eggs? Bad pastors who get on the church's payroll? Is there any way for the church to dismiss them?

And for that matter, how should a man be chosen in the first place? What if he starts well and then goes bad?

What are we going to see in the text in front of us is what the church's responsibility is when it comes to hiring or dismissing pastors. Or to put it another way, how can the church protect the pastorate – the office of pastor?

And as we look at verses 19, down to verse 25, we'll see the three dangers that the church must protect the pastorate from : false accusations, disqualifying sins, and unqualified men.

I. Protect the Pastorate From False Accusations

¹⁹ Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses.

That literally means do not welcome or entertain, don't even admit any charge of wrongdoing against a pastor, except if there are the required two or three witnesses.

That doesn't mean that you just gather two or three people to be with you and you make the accusation. It means those two or three people must themselves have seen or witnessed the charge

you are bringing. Those two or three people corroborate the charge.

In other words, the Bible is saying, don't accept, don't listen to, don't entertain a charge, brought against the pastor except if there are the required two or three people who will back that up. And this comes from Deuteronomy 19:15. "One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established."

But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that *'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.'* (Matthew 18:16)

This is probably very important for Timothy in his context, as we can tell through the letter they were vain talkers, plenty of babblers, plenty of superstitions, people given to wild speculation. In that kind of environment, there are loose lips. People who are just a little too quick to come up with stories and charges.

Well, Paul doesn't want the ministry to be reduced to the level of frivolous charges. If the ministry was to respond to every person who's merely grumbling or murmuring, or finding something they don't like, nothing would get done. The church would be in a perpetual trial, a continual court case. The Bible, of course tells us that it's part of our fallen condition to be in rebellion. It's part of the fallen condition to grumble and to murmur.

And so, unless this procedure is put in place, people cannot discern between mere preferences in a church that they don't like, and actual sin. They never learn to see and weigh differently things they dislike with things that are actually disqualifying.

Without that distinction, churches can end up dismissing good men.

Without understanding that this is to be the procedure, people can just give into whims in our democratic age. We should just always get to say whatever we feel; we just say what's on our heart.

And if we allow that when it comes to the serious business of an accusation against a pastor, we're going to drag the ministry down to the level of some of these talk shows, the gossip rags, the scandal sheets, the tabloids.

Now the church needs stability. The church needs the kind of structure that can weather the perversity of people and sail on. God's people want ministries with integrity; they want there to be an island of respectability in a world of scandals.

And so God wants there to be fair and just principles in His church that protect the pastorate from false accusations.

D. L. Moody said that a lie can get halfway around the world while truth is still getting into running shoes on. It's easy for false accusations to be made.

Harry Ironside tells us the story of a pastor who had been accused. And so he wrote in his own defence, something of the following. He said "I've been recently accused of forbidding my wife to attend another church that is of a more emotional nature, and that having disobeyed me, I went and fetched her from that church, dragged her by the hair, beat her into a state in which she ended up in hospital.

I wish to respond to those charges. In the first place. I've never forbidden her from attending any church. I've given her perfect freedom to go when she would like.

In the second place, I did not go and drag her by the hair and bring her home. In the third place, I did not hurt her so badly that she needed to be hospitalised and in the fourth place, as many of you know, I am not, and have never been married. False accusations. The Bible has examples of frivolous accusations against leaders.

We see that in Nehemiah the book we're going through, where Sanballat and Tobias decided to launch frivolous accusations against Nehemiah, claiming that he wanted to be king in the land, or that he was rebellious to his own authorities or that he was this self indulgent, corrupt leader. And they sought to destroy the work of God, by spreading these slanders. Nehemiah simply wouldn't give any credence to them. He didn't give the time of day to these accusations.

Paul was slandered by his opponents. They claimed that Paul says that we might live as we please if we're under grace, that let us do evil that good may come.

The Bible knows there will be frivolous charges brought against God's servants. And these frivolous charges don't need to be countenanced.

So the way that that's done is by making sure that anyone who has an accusation takes it with necessary seriousness. If someone comes and just starts accusing Timothy is to simply say, I'm sorry, I cannot entertain this at all. Until you get two or three witnesses who can corroborate what you are about to tell me, I don't want to hear it. When you have those, then we're going to gather together the pastor and the other leaders, or men of proven judgement and we will hear this charge, and we'll let the pastor defend himself. We'll hear what you have to say. And then we'll proceed.

Well, this is a hurdle to false accusations. False accusations usually die away, when they see that they're going to be scrutinised under the light of truth.

Protect the pastorate from false accusations.

II. Protect the Pastorate From Disqualifying Sin

²⁰ Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear. ²¹ I charge *you* before God and the Lord Jesus Christ and the elect angels that you observe these things without prejudice, doing nothing with partiality.

The Word says, expose the sinning ones publicly, those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all so the rest, that's the rest of the people and the other pastors may have or respect or fear. And then he says, Timothy, I solemnly charge you, I warn you, I admonish you to keep these things without prejudice. To do nothing out of partiality.

So, here, Paul says protect the pastorate from disqualifying sin.

If a pastor is found guilty by following that procedure of the two or three witnesses, and it's clear that this man has committed something that is not a frivolous charge, it's a serious charge, it's disqualifying, then, Timothy, without any bias without any prejudice one way or the other, is supposed to expose them publicly.

He's supposed to, if the sin warrants it, dismiss them and make it known to the whole church, that these elders or this elder sinned can no longer shepherd the church. And the fact that that is then done publicly, will cause there to be a widespread respect. A sense of fear, that this church takes things seriously.

Why? Well, God has a standard for his leaders. And a failure to live by that standard must be dealt with. In God's church, leaders are accountable to God and to the church.

To have incorruptible and unapproachable, immovable leaders is the sign of a cult. You know you're in a healthy church when those leaders are held to a standard, a standard that's in the Word of God that they must live by.

And this shows us that in God's Church, no leader is indispensable or irreplaceable, or invulnerable. Instead, pastors can be removed; they can be disqualified, and the church must be protected from disqualified pastors. They must be disciplined. They must be removed. You protect the name and reputation of the position of pastor by disciplining disqualified men.

Too often, the church is infected with a kind of a hero worship, where it doesn't matter what a man does, because he's so gifted in his abilities or in his oratory. In his speaking, he becomes untouchable. Or because he's caused the church to grow so exceedingly, no one calls him on his sin.

Conversely, you sometimes get pastors with such an inflated sense of their own calling that they can never accept that they have indeed, failed. They haven't kept the standard, they are disqualified.

And too often, we now see churches that persist with disqualified leaders. They carry on, though by any clear standard in the Word, the man up there is disqualified. And when churches do that, they cannot expect God's blessing on the work. They're being disobedient at a very fundamental level. At the level of leadership, they are refusing to obey what God says.

It's not just the leader who's refusing to obey; it's the church, because the church is not obeying the Scripture to publicly rebuke those pastors that have fallen and have been proven to be fallen by their procedure.

Many people have either been in churches or been close to churches, where there were leaders who should have stepped down but didn't; leaders who were genuinely disqualified by a biblical standard but continued to preach and teach. And many of God's people were afflicted in conscience by it, but nothing was done about it.

But on the other hand, what a relief for God's people to know that there is freedom from abusive leaders, that there are checks and balances in God's Word.

No one need live perpetually under a disqualified teacher. If there is no mechanism in that church to remove a disqualified teacher, then the Christian should remove himself from their church.

The problem is too often, people don't follow these procedures. They either don't leave the church, they think it's up to God to strike the leader down with a lightning bolt. Some have convinced themselves that the man is not disqualified and perhaps leaders don't fall.

No. Here the Bible tells us that most times God is not going to remove the man with a heart attack. He expects the church to dismiss a man who has fallen into disqualifying sin. This will purify the church. It will keep God's blessing on the church.

It takes courage. Think about how the Lord Jesus did this with the Pharisees. He publicly admonished and rebuked them in front of all the people that were following in submitting to those Pharisees. Jesus got up and said, Woe to you Pharisees. He said, you are disqualified by any biblical standard. You teach and you don't live; you're hypocrites, you're false teachers.

Think of how Paul rebuked Peter in Galatians. He was willing to say, you are a leader and yet now

you are falling into the trap of the Judaizers and fellowshiping only with the Jews. You're denying a practical outworking of the gospel. He rebuked Peter publicly.

You know in the world they are mechanisms to take leaders out, presidents can be impeached, CEOs can be dismissed. It's a shame and a scandal when in churches, this can't happen or doesn't happen.

So how should it happen?

Well, if a biblical procedure has been followed, most churches or good churches at least outline that procedure in detail in their constitution. And if that's been followed, then the person should be dismissed, disciplined with a public announcement.

Now it takes leaders with courage. It takes churches with discernment. It takes people who are willing to follow through. You say, what if we don't have people who are willing to follow through and purify the leadership? Then you're in the wrong church. Then you need to be in a place where you can tell there's enough accountability, enough checks and balances. Enough courageous people who'd be willing to hold even the leaders to the standard of Scripture in biblical ways.

One of the ways protect this from happening is who we allow in the pulpit to begin with.

III. Protect the Pastorate From Unqualified Men

²² Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people's sins; keep yourself pure. ²³ No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities.

Paul says don't lay hands on anyone hastily and don't share in the sins of others keep yourself pure.

What does he mean by this?

By the laying on of hands, Paul is talking about identifying and selecting pastors and leaders. You remember we saw this earlier in First Timothy 4:14, where Paul said that the gift that was given you was by the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. So this is a reference to what we call ordination.

Ordination is when the church sets someone apart after examining him and recognises that he is being called to the ministry. The laying on of hands is a symbolic gesture: to say this person is being set apart, we identify with him, we recognise him as a pastor and we believe he's been called of God to this position.

Now, Paul says, Don't do this too quickly. The word *hastily* means, "without taking necessary pains". Being hasty, impatient, and even lazy and just shoving a man into that position.

If you select the wrong men, and unqualified men, you become partly responsible for bad leadership in the church, you share in his sins, you become a partaker in those sins. Similar to when John writes in his second epistle, that the man who greets the apostate and shows him hospitality. He says he shares in his evil deeds, he partakes in them.

So it is with a too hasty selection or too hasty recognition of a man as an elder means that those that have selected him share in his sin; they are partly guilty of putting that man in.

Paul says, If you do that, then you're not keeping yourself pure. You are becoming part of the

problem. Protect the church from unqualified men, by not putting them in too hastily. Keep pure.

Now the mention of purity leads Paul to a parenthetical remark. Apparently Timothy, because of a desire to be pure, abstained from all alcohol and drank only water. But in Paul's day, the water was often quite impure and likely to upset an already sensitive stomach. It was the practice of the ancients to mix their wine with water, in fact, they considered unmixed wine to be rather barbaric. They did this both to dilute the alcoholic effect of the wine, and also because the alcohol in the wine purified the water by killing off the bacteria in it. So, Paul calls for Timothy to use the medicinal properties of wine, mix it with his water, and go easy on his stomach, and perhaps cure some of his other ailments.

No longer drink only water, but drink a little wine for your stomach sake and your frequent ailments.

But back to ordaining men. He tells us why ordaining pastors too hastily is dangerous.

²⁴ Some men's sins are clearly evident, preceding *them* to judgment, but those of some *men* follow later. ²⁵ Likewise, the good works *of some* are clearly evident, and those that are otherwise cannot be hidden.

Probably the greatest danger when it comes to appointing leaders in the church is haste. It's this desire to fill the positions before you have qualified people. And it's simply impatience.

Sometimes it's man-pleasing, the desire to have a plurality of elders before you actually have men who are truly called to that vocation.

The result of this is churches with leaders who are unqualified. And soon enough, they fall. Back in chapter three, Paul told us that you should not put a novice into the pastorate, lest you be tempted with pride and fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Men who are not ready, they were too young. They were untested. They were immature. So they fall.

Sometimes we wrongly assume that what you see is what you get, and that a man who seems to be nice and knowledgeable and committed and involved is automatically leadership material. Not so.

It's far better to allow people to serve in other capacities, and wait and watch. Rather have less leaders than unqualified ones that you have to remove.

Why should we do this? Because we're supposed to keep the church pure. We to understand that sins are often like plants, some pop up really quickly, and you can pull them out. But some hibernate under the surface.

Before someone is put into leadership, and particularly the pastorate, he needs to have been watched.

He needs to have been tested. He needs to have gone through certain trials, showing that he's able to manage his own household, showing that he can manage his own finances, showing that he can handle temptations and criticism and discouragement and his own marriage.

The Bible has its own examples of men who were in a position and then were disqualified. Somebody like Demas, who forsook the ministry, having loved this present world.

So how should we go about this?

As a church, we simply need to be patient and take our time with the selection of pastors. Those who are considered need to be men with a track record of servanthood and leadership, either in our church or in another. They need to have been equipped, to have done some kind of studies, some kind of learning.

They need to express the desire and make it known that they desire the office of pastor that they longed to shepherd God's people.

Their desire and their giftedness should then be noticed and shared by the leadership of the church. At that point, the church moves towards formal ordination and the man prepares a rather detailed statement of doctrine and belief.

He prepares a statement of his own ministry philosophy. And then we usually invite pastors from like-minded churches, to take several hours to examine the man in a question and answer session that last several hours. They question him regarding his doctrine, his ministry, his personal life, and after these men have done that they then make a recommendation to our church: this man is ready or not ready to be recognised as a pastor. The church should take their counsel and their recommendation very seriously. The church would then vote to call the man into the pastorate. And we would recognise that with a formal laying on of hands.

Shepherds protect the flock of God. But ironically, there is a way that the flock of God protects the shepherds, or at least protects the position and reputation of the office of shepherd. Protect it from frivolous and false accusations so that worthy men don't get scared off or falsely dismissed. Protect it from disqualified men who would wrongly keep on leading when they need to be rebuked and removed. Protect it from unqualified or not-yet qualified men by not being hasty in ordaining men to eldership.

I wonder how fewer high profile scandals we would have if churches worldwide were protecting the ministry, the office of the pastorate like this.