Protecting the Elders

I. Protecting a Pastor-Elder from False Accusations, 1 Timothy 5:19

"Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses."

(1 Tim. 5:19 ESV)

One way to honor your elders is to protect them from malicious people and false accusations. Remember the context of this letter: false teachers had caused chaos in the church. There were lots of problems caused by these teachers – some of them were elders, it appears. So accusations are going to fly in this church, especially at the leaders.

A. The Problem of False Accusations

1. We must not be naive about the fact that there are plenty of hateful, unstable people who aim to ruin people in authority. Godly men like Joseph, Moses, David, Jeremiah, Nehemiah, Paul, and even Jesus Christ all experienced the bitter sting of false accusation.

   “And David said to Saul, ‘Why do you listen to the words of men, who say, “Behold, David seeks to harm you?”’” (1 Sam. 24:9)

2. In verse 20 of our passage, Deut. 19:15 is quoted about witnesses. The whole context of Deuteronomy 19 is the sin of the malicious witness who bears false against a brother or sister (verse 16).

   If a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing... (Deut. 19:16)

3. If an elder stands between a husband and wife in conflict or disciplines a prominent church member, accusations will fly. Amos wrote:

   “They hate him who reproves in the gate, and they abhor him who speaks the truth.”

   (Amos 5:10)

4. Let me put it this way: The more diligently and conscientiously an elder becomes involved in others’ problems and deals with their conflict, the greater the risk of facing angry, false accusations.

   a) When people become angry at their leaders, they think they have the right to strike out at them and say whatever they want to say.

   b) So Scripture provides protection for elders by stating, “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.”

   c) This means, don’t even listen to unsubstantiated charges, and don’t automatically accept as true an accusation made against an elder.
B. The Problem of People’s Love for Hearing Scandalous Tales

1. As sinners, we love to hear scandalous stories and rumors.
   a) Proverbs 18:8 says, “The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels, and they go down into the inner parts of the body.”
   b) If you don’t believe this, look at all the gossip magazines and TV shows trafficking in scandalous stories. Our culture promotes this!

2. But Christians are to be people of truth, love, light, and integrity.
   a) Therefore, we should hate scandalous tales and unsupported rumors.
   b) We should silence them whenever we hear them because they are destructive and harmful to individual people and to the life of the community.
      1) Good people have been ruined by unfounded accusations, and we should not allow this to happen in the Christian community.
      2) Illustration of parachurch organization’s prayer meeting and the announcement that Marilyn and I separated.
      3) If you hear rumors or tales, always check with the person whom they are about, even if you heard it from “reliable sources.”

C. The Legal Principle of Verification by Witnesses

1. Fair, reasonable protection from accusation doesn’t imply immunity from accusations.

2. Paul adds the condition, “except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.” This means that an accusation brought by two or three people who have witnessed the sin, or by two or three people who have either witnessed the sin or have verified another’s accusation, must be investigated and properly judged.
   a) The legal principle on which this directive is based is Mosaic legislation found in Deuteronomy 19:15 and 17:6.
      "A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he as committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established." (Deut. 19:15)
   b) An accusation of sin is to be substantiated by responsible witnesses, not by a single accuser. This is true for all people, not just elders. The person is innocent until justly proven guilty.
   c) You don’t like to be falsely accused of deeds or words you didn’t do. So treat others just the way you would want to be judged.

3. As unpleasant and time-consuming as a fair investigation into an accusation might be, it must be done. Sin must not be hidden, nor can an innocent person remain falsely accused. There is due process and elders deserve due process from accusations of sin. The Old Testament testifies to this need.

4. God is a righteous and just God (Ps. 7:11, 67:4) and his children are to be just judges. Let us be objective, just and fair when we hear rumors or scandalous tales about others. And when we do have to investigate these, let us seek to be fair and just like our God.