

# Assessing Prospective Elders

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## *Detailed Outline*

### *Part 4 of 4*

## **I. A Call to Courageous Obedience and Justice**

### **D. Judge Sin and Do Not Fear the Consequences**

1. Despite this forceful appeal to act, the public discipline of church leaders has been almost unheard of in most churches until recently. The practice of covering up church officials' sins and the trick of quietly moving the offending official to another church is common.
  - a) Sadly, the predominant reason churches are beginning to discipline sinful pastors is not because they fear and honor God, but because of the proliferation of multi-million dollar lawsuits against churches by people who have been hurt and abused by sinning pastors.
  - b) Illustration: The Roman Catholic church has suffered one of its worst blows of public credibility because of the multiple scandals of priests sexually molesting children. What has outraged Catholics is that these heinous sins were covered up, and the priests were moved on to other places and never disciplined.
2. Covering up sin and moving the offending party on to another church is injustice to those who have been sinned against. And it is downright, out-and-out disobedience to what God commands us to do in this passage.
3. The failure to publicly discipline church leaders demonstrates a grievous lack of love for God and his Word. It reveals that we do not fear and serve God, but we play church games.
  - a) No matter how difficult or unpleasant such discipline may be, we must "keep these rules" in obedience to God.
  - b) The fear of God's judgment and assessment of our stewardship is to be our constant motivation and encouragement in all such difficult matters.

## **II. Assessing Prospective Elders (1 Tim. 5:22-25)**

Investigating accusations of sin and publicly disciplining leaders are always emotionally traumatic experiences. So in verses 22-25, Paul counsels Timothy about how to best avoid further problems with church leaders. This is invaluable material for all of us.

### **A. Do Not Be Hasty in the Laying On of Hands (v. 22)**

Paul begins with an important cautionary note:

*"Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure."  
(1 Tim. 5:22)*

1. The laying on of hands is an ancient symbolic act that can be used for appointment to office or commissioning one to a specific task (Acts 6:6). It publicly transfers responsibility or authority to others. It also expresses blessing and approval.
2. Here it is applied to appointing elders. If there are elders who have been dismissed from office, there is the temptation to quickly appoint someone new to take their place.
  - a) Because of the crying need for church leaders, there is always pressure to make careless, hasty appointments, but such appointments create more serious, long-lasting problems.
  - b) Time, testing, and careful examination are still the best principles to follow when appointing church leaders. This means that prevention is still the best cure.
  - c) In numerous cases of leadership failure (but certainly not all), the real problem is that unfit, unproven men were appointed too quickly to those positions.
  - d) Paul advises Timothy that one way to prevent unworthy men from becoming spiritual leaders is to avoid rash, hasty appointments.
3. Some scholars believe this principle applies to a disciplined elder who seeks restoration to a position of eldership after being either removed from office or publicly rebuked by the other elders before the congregation because of sin.
4. I contend that the passage address new prospective elders and not restored elders.

**B. The Laying On of Hands Creates a Bond between Two Parties.**

1. The one (or ones) who appoints, by the laying on of hands, “shares” (*koinoneo*, “take part” or “participate”) in the *sins or successes* of the one appointed.
  - a) If an unfit person is appointed to leadership without proper examination and then sins by creating division, teaching false doctrine, or acting immorally, those who appointed the leader “share responsibility” for those sins (2 John 11).
  - b) The appointers share in the guilt of the appointee, because the appointer did not properly assess the person’s sinful, unfit character.
2. The more we understand the solemn, personal responsibility of appointing people to positions of leadership in the church, the more we will exercise reservation, thoughtfulness, and prayerfulness in our appointments.
3. One good reason to encourage the practice of the laying on of hands is that it creates an observable, personal, and tangible sense of responsibility and fellowship between the parties involved.

### C. Paul's Personal Warning to Timothy

1. Fully aware of the seriousness of his charge to Timothy, Paul adds the positive word, *"Keep yourself pure."*
  - a) The unwise appointment of an unqualified elder could stain Timothy's reputation. It could cause him to "share responsibility" in that person's sins and failure.
  - b) So Paul reminds Timothy to keep himself pure. And this can be done by proactive examination of all candidates for office. That is by carefully and prayerfully examining all candidates to church office (1 Tim. 3:10; 5:24, 25).
2. Verse 23 is a short footnote, sparked by the word "pure" that requires clarification.
  - a) Knowing about the situation at Ephesus (1 Tim. 4:1- 5) and Timothy's personal habit of abstaining from drinking wine and frequent health problems, Paul encourages him to drink:  
*"No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments." (1 Tim. 5:23)*  
"A little wine" will not defile, although using much wine would. Hence, Timothy could take some wine and remain pure before those he leads.
  - b) This brief, personal digression expressing regard for Timothy's personal health is a clear example of the true-to-life nature of this letter and is an affirmation of its Pauline authorship.

### D. Help for Assessing Prospective Elders

Paul's warning against sharing in other's sins could easily frighten those who must appoint people to responsible positions in the church.

To counter this fear, Paul picks up where he left off in verse 22 and cites two brief maxims that explain how to prevent an unfit man from being appointed to eldership or even restored:

*The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden. (1 Tim. 5:24, 25)*

*"As far as avoiding mistakes is concerned, and thus possibly making the wrong man an elder, Timothy need not worry, for the difficulty as to judging is not great. This is said for Timothy's comfort." – Richard Lenski*

*"Timothy has been called on to diagnose character, and Paul supplies him with a clue for the task, and the verdicts he has to pass." – E. K. Simpson*

#### 1. First Category of People

*"The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment." (v. 24a)*

- a) Some men's sins are easily discerned, they are obvious, that no one would think of appointing them to office, thus no evaluation for appointment to leadership is necessary.

- b) Their “sins” precede them; that is, they show in advance of any formal examination that the man is utterly unfit for a position of spiritual leadership.
- c) The “judgment” Paul refers to is human assessment (Matt. 5:21; John 7:24), not God’s judgment. God is not the subject here because all sins are evident to him (1 Cor. 4:5).

## 2. Second Category of People

But now Paul deals with what is more difficult problem to discern and maybe Paul’s chief concern:

*“But the sins of others appear later.” (v. 24b)*

- a) The sins of some men are not easily seen on the surface, so action must be suspended until the man’s character and conduct are examined.
  - 1) Paul assures Timothy that the “sins” of these men will be exposed at the time of their examination. God is not the only one who can see sin--men can too, if they take the time to investigate. Like the first category of unfit men, these men, although their sins are more subtle, must be refused eldership because they are not above reproach.
  - 2) This is a reason why you should always avoid hasty appointments. And also to protect yourself from sharing in their sins or the need for public rebuke.
- b) But if an unfit is appointed to office after careful examination, those in charge cannot be accused of sin because they did all they humanly could to assess the candidate’s character.

*“In exceptional cases of deception and hypocrisy, which only [God] who is able to see the heart could detect, evidently no sin can be charged against the conscientious judge who has nevertheless been deceived ... In such rare cases Timothy will not be fellowshipping the sins of such men; he will still be pure.” – commentator’s name??*

Only God’s final judgment will be perfect and not limited by human fallibility.

## 3. Third Category of People

The form of the second maxim is similar to the first:

*“So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.” (v. 25a)*

- a) The good works of some men are obvious before any examination is made. Their lives are full of loving deeds, concern for others, their faith is seen in their actions and their beliefs are acted out for the good of others. They have godly lives.
- b) These men are easily identified as men who are fit for church eldership.

## 4. Fourth Category of People

Some men’s good works are not obvious, but upon examination their good deeds become apparent:

*“And even those [good deeds] that are not cannot remain hidden.” (v. 25b)*

- a) The good works of these men cannot be hidden, and it will become obvious that they are fit candidates for appointment to eldership.

- b) Paul is assuring Timothy that as long as he does not act hastily in appointing elders and carefully examines the candidates, he will find the right men.
- c) Armed with these words of encouragement, Timothy and the church leaders are prepared to accomplish the challenging task before them.