

What Does the Bible Teach About What to Do When Members and Elders Disagree

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake from multiple sources)

Introduction:

- A. Read 1 Timothy 5:17-21
- B. The Lord determined that local churches be overseen, led by, protected by a collectivity of spiritually qualified men called elders, bishops, pastors, overseers, or shepherds; and, He commanded that churches appoint them and that members follow their leadership. Regardless of the members view of the elders' leadership or their opinion that the church could function well without them, churches are commanded to appoint qualified men and to yield to their scripturally based wisdom and decisions.
 1. However, on occasion elders collectively can make an error in judgment, or an individual elder may succumb to temptation and set a poor example, and some may even find themselves no longer qualified due to a pattern of unrepentant words or behaviors.
 - a. In my own twenty years of serving local churches (Tomlinson Run and Trilacoochee) as an elder, I vividly recall four times when the elders erred in judgment regarding a challenge that the congregations faced; judgment calls that required the elders to publically acknowledge the mistake. In every case, the local church received the acknowledgement and expressed an increase in their confidence in the elders. This is the Lord's way and was very encouraging.
 2. In addition, members, collectively or individually, may come to the conclusion that the elders, collectively or individually, may be in error doctrinally, or have sinned, or have simply exercised poor judgment.
 - a. Likewise, I have had a number of occasions to experience this as well. In many cases a simple conversation or Bible study resolved the matter; yet, there were times that the disagreement grew into a serious crisis. What does the Bible teach about members and elders disagreeing on any matter?

I. UNDERSTANDING THE SCRIPTURES

- A. "Receive" - paradechomai; to receive beside, give ear to, entertain. (Greek definitions taken from Strongs unless otherwise noted; 3858)
 1. "At the mouth of" - Num. 35:30; Deut. 19:15; John 8:17
 2. "Paul applies the principle of the law to Timothy's dealings with presbyters who might be accused of not "ruling well." He was not to encourage delatores, secret accusers and defamers, but if anyone had a charge to make against a ruler, it was to be done in the presence of witnesses." (Pulpit's Commentary)
 3. It is not witnesses to support the accusation; instead, it is witnesses in whose presence the accusation must be made.

4. The office of an elder is one that must be respected. By giving the inspired qualifications, by meeting those qualifications in his life and being appointed by the congregation, God has essentially qualified that person to that office and anyone who has an accusation against that man must be extremely careful in how that accusation is made.
 5. The presence of two or three witnesses provides for accountability and protection for the elder and the accuser. This allows for the charge to be heard, investigated, and substantiated before it goes before the church.
 6. "There are always people eager to falsely accuse a man of God. They may do so because they resent his office, reject his teaching, resist biblical authority, resent virtue, or are jealous of the Lord's blessing in his life. Ultimately, however, they demonstrate by making such accusations that they have become messengers of Satan. Such false accusations are one of his most dangerous weapons. Joseph, Moses, David, Jeremiah, Nehemiah, and our Lord Jesus Christ all suffered from false accusations. Therefore, any member of the church or leader in the church who accepts an accusation against their pastor in a private setting without hearing it before the pastor himself is guilty of sin." (The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, 1Timothy 2:21).
- B. 1Tim. 5:19 - "Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses."
1. "Do not receive" - paradechomai; receive, give ear to, entertain (3858)
 2. "Against" - kata; against (2596)
 3. "An accusation" - kategoria; a speaking down, as an accusation before a tribunal (2724)
- C. 1Tim. 5:20 - "Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear."
1. "Are sinning" - hamartano; err, miss the mark (264)
 2. "Rebuke in the presence of all" - elegcho; to convict before all (1651)
 3. "Fear" - phobon; to have fear, alarm, fright (5401)
- D. 1Tim. 5:21 - "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."
1. "Observe" - phulasso; to guard, keep watch (5442)
 2. "Without prejudice" - prokrima; preference (4299)
 3. "Partiality" - prosklino; to incline towards one, a bearing toward (4346)

II. UNDERSTANDING THE SAFEGUARDS ON ELDERS

- A. Personal responsibility of all.
1. At no time are elders above the evaluation of the people they serve.
 2. Every person in the pew has this responsibility.
 3. As family members, we are to be accessible enough to receive and to speak the truth in love.
 4. However, it must be done in an orderly, Biblically prescribed manner.
 5. Eph. 4:15, 25-26; Luke 17:3-4; Gal. 4:16; Matt. 5:23-24; Col. 3:13

B. Held to a stricter judgment - James 3:1

1. With greater responsibility comes greater accountability, and greater vulnerability to public rebuke.

C. Multiple witnesses are required.

1. First there must be a personal witness. Then, that person is obligated to bring a minimum of two other witnesses to the elder being charged, implying a vigilant examination and verification process.
2. This is designed to protect the elder from trivial, false, or malicious accusations, from accusations based on rumors, gossip, or slander.
3. It is part of the territory: elders are often targets of criticism since they are fallible human beings, and the best of men can be picked apart by someone determined to find fault.
4. Telling the preacher is an unscriptural way of handling it. Stop it!
5. My fellow elders and I are on the same page 99 days out of 100, and collectively we have the best interests of this church at heart 100 days out of 100. I will not listen to your complaints about any of them, unless you are asking me to go with you as one of two other witnesses while you talk to them. Otherwise, I don't want to hear it.
6. They will listen humbly, too. We have spoken of some very hard things over the years, and we are still dear friends.
7. So talk to them yourself if it is a personality thing, or take witnesses if it is a scriptural matter. Either way, they will listen and respond in a godly way. If they do not respond well, they will cease to be qualified as elders and be asked to step down.
8. Seeking an elder's counsel regarding a difficult matter is expected; complaining about or tattling on another member and then insisting on anonymity is a clear violation of the Jesus Christ's instructions. Stop it! In addition, if an elder receives such complaints without instructing the member to address his issues with other disciples, he has betrayed his office and colluded in someone else's sin.
9. This applies to all elders, preachers, and members in all places.

D. Partiality must be avoided

1. Partiality has many faces. Sometimes it expresses itself when there is a talented, charismatic elder, and people will hold him to a lower standard; but, someone with less ability and an undiplomatic manner will often be judged more critically and unsympathetically.
2. There are no "Kennedys" in the Lord's Church, no royal families who get better or different treatment than others; and, that applies to elders.
3. For this reason, we do not compare one Christian to another. It would be completely unfair, and it would anger you if we did that. The elders ask that you give them the same courtesy.

E. Accountability for sins and weaknesses.

1. First, the text says "sins" not personality clashes, differing viewpoints and priorities, bad manners, or unkempt appearance. It says sin.
2. Second, every elder is accountable for his sins; no excuse will suffice.
3. When he sins, he is no longer above reproach - 1Tim. 3:2

4. What if he repents? This passage gives no indication that repentance suspends rebuke. In fact, there is no mention of repentance in the text. Paul's instructions are very clear. The purpose of this rebuke is not to produce repentance in the elder, important as that may be, but to cause all "to fear."
5. No one gets a pass in the Lord's Church when it comes to sin, especially not elders. Holding elders accountable increases the credibility of the local church both among the members and in the community.
6. If it is a sin that destroys his influence, he ceases to be qualified. He can be forgiven of the sin, but often the temporal, earthly consequences of sin remain.

F. A rebuke that reveals and remonstrates.

1. The investigation process must reveal that the charge was not trivial. It must verify that the accusation was for serious sin, not the result of pickiness, harshness, personal vendetta, envy, or a critical spirit in the hearts of the accusers.
2. The rebuke should be delivered according to wisdom, measured according to the severity of the sin and the disposition of the offender.

G. A public rendering.

1. The rebuke is to be delivered before the whole congregation.
2. Embarrassment to the sinner, his family, or the church should not be considerations.
3. "Those that sin before all rebuke before all, that the bandage may be as wide as the wound, and that those who are in danger of sinning by the example of their fallen leader may take warning by the rebuke given them for it." (Matthew Henry Commentary)

H. The courage to cause fear.

1. In today's religious environment, elders and members often prefer a positive, upbeat church life; free from guilt, repentance or fear.
2. The good that comes from an elder's rebuke is that it causes all to search their own lives for sin. In this sense, the elder's rebuke is also their rebuke. It heightens godly fear of sin and restrains wickedness.
3. Psalm 97:10-11; Isa. 55:7; Jude 23; 2Thes 2:12; James 4:17; 1John 1:9
4. In order for congregations to have the courage to obey the Lord in this, there must be an understanding that this kind of fear is actually a good thing and that it accomplishes godly purposes. Fear causes repentance, and fleeing from sin. Turning from sin ultimately brings about the well-being and happiness of the believer and the whole church.
5. "The judgment of the Church is the instrument of God's love, and the moment it is accepted in the sinful soul, it begins to work as a redemptive force." (James Denney, On Local Church Discipline)

I. Trembling at the seriousness of the matter.

1. How serious is this matter? "I charge you before God and the Lord Jesus Christ and the elect angels..." How often did he write this?

2. "As the saving doctrine of Christ is the soul of the church, so discipline forms ligaments which connect the members together, and keep each in its proper place. Whoever, therefore, either desires the abolition of all discipline, or obstructs its restoration, whether they act from design or inadvertency, they certainly promote the entire dissolution of the Church." (Calvin Commentary)
 3. "When discipline leaves a church, Christ goes out with it." (John Dagg)
- J. The blessings of obedience:
1. Blessings always flow when scripture is obeyed.
 2. It causes the power of gospel repentance to be known and seen.
 3. It causes sin to be purged in both elder and congregation.
 4. It diminishes love for the world and increases love for Jesus Christ.
 5. It heals. It warns. It restores.
 6. David called it "excellent oil" - Psalm 141:5
 7. Job said it causes happiness - Job 5:17-18

Conclusion:

- A. While people may wonder how elders are held accountable, it is a great comfort to know that the church is not left to figure it out without instruction.
 1. God provided us with 1Timothy 5:19-21 which describes an orderly and healing process for how sinning elders are held accountable and set free by loving witnesses dedicated to his restoration and overall purity of the local church.