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## ELDERS: MEN OF THE WORD

Titus 1:9

By

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Titus Lesson 4

Elders: Men of the Word  
Titus 1:9

I doubt if there has ever been a time in the history of the church when the enemy has not in some way or another been attacking the Word of God. During the Middle Ages, many if not most of the priests in the Catholic Church were ignorant of the basic teachings of the Bible. Since the Bible was not translated into the common languages, only the priests could read it (in Latin) and teach it, but few of them did. The Reformation was at its heart a revival of God's Word. Luther translated the Bible into German, so that common people could read it. Both he and Calvin preached expository sermons, explaining and applying the Bible to people's everyday lives.

Although the Reformation spread to England, by the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, things were in a bad way. J. I. Packer (*A Quest for Godliness* [Crossway Books], 1990), pp. 51-52) writes, "Many churches had not had a sermon preached in them for years." Many of the clergy were biblically ignorant. In this spiritually bleak time, God raised up the Puritans. They believed that pastors "are responsible for rebuking heresy and defending truth, lest their flocks be misled and thereby enfeebled, if not worse. Biblical truth is nourishing, human error is killing, so spiritual shepherds must guard sound doctrine at all costs" (*ibid.*, p. 64). Packer observes (p. 98),

Puritanism was, above all else, a Bible movement. To the Puritan the Bible was in truth the most precious possession that this world affords. His deepest conviction was that reverence for God means reverence for Scripture, and serving God means obeying Scripture. To his mind, therefore, no greater insult could be offered to the Creator than to neglect his written word; and, conversely, there could be no truer act of homage to him than to prize it and pore over it, and then to live out and give out its teaching. Intense veneration for Scripture, as the living word of the living God, and a devoted concern to know and do all that it prescribes, was Puritanism's hallmark.

Over the years that I have been a pastor, I have seen the enemy attack God's Word in two obvious ways. Back in the late 1970's and early 1980's, there was an attack on the inerrancy of Scripture. Harold Lindsell, who had taught at Fuller Seminary, wrote *The Battle for the Bible* [Zondervan, 1976] exposing the erosion of trust in the absolute accuracy of the Bible among some of Fuller's faculty. He also showed the same erosion in several denominations and parachurch groups. As a response to this situation, the Lord raised up the International Council of Biblical Inerrancy, which published the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, which clearly spells out what we affirm and deny regarding the authority and truthfulness of the Bible.

More recently, the enemy has subtly attacked God's Word through the Seeker church movement and the Emerging church movement. The Seeker movement is based on a worthy goal, to reach out to unchurched seekers and bring them to faith in Christ. At the heart of the strategy is redesigning the Sunday morning service so that it is aimed primarily at this target audience. Hymns are replaced with upbeat, contemporary music. They often use drama. Services are kept short, to about an hour. Believers are discouraged from bringing their Bibles to church, because that would threaten the unchurched. Sermons are short and almost always topical self-help talks about how to succeed in life. One church growth writer stated that if you want your church to grow, you should not ever preach on anything controversial or negative. (For insightful critiques of this movement, see David Wells, *No Place for Truth* [1993], *God in the Wasteland* [1994], and *Losing Our Virtue* [1998], all Eerdmans.)

Now, the Emergent church finds the Seeker churches too big and glitzy and program-driven. They want to emphasize building close relationships in the church, which, of course, is a good thing. But they buy into the flawed philosophy of postmodernism, which denies absolute truth in the moral or spiritual realm. Experience is emphasized over doctrine. Tolerance and acceptance are key virtues. To have a pastor stand up each week and tell everyone how they should live (even if it is based on the Bible) is viewed as arrogant and judgmental. Doctrine is greatly de-emphasized.

I went to the web site of an Emergent church in Flagstaff. At least they had a doctrinal statement, but to get to it, you had to read a disclaimer that says that doctrine really isn't important. At another part of their site, they say, "While we do have a brief statement of beliefs, we prefer not to 'over theologize' but rather allow the community of faith to interpret the Scriptures and apply its lessons to themselves." At today's service, for example, attenders were encouraged to "share a poem, song, picture, sculpture, dance, photo, video, etc. celebrating one of the beatitudes!" They're saying in effect, "We're not really into doctrine. If you're hung up with that stuff, we feel sorry for you. If you'll get over it, we'll show you how can experience Jesus with us."

All of this to introduce our text, a verse that if followed would steer the church back in the much-needed direction of the Reformers and the Puritans. Paul says (1:9) that an elder should be a man who holds "fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict." The fact is, everyone that professes to know Christ, including those in the Emergent church, holds to a theology. The question is whether they hold to a biblically sound theology. To the extent that our theology veers from Scripture, we are worshiping a false god of our own imagination.

Thus we all need to grow in understanding the Bible so that we can know God better and follow His ways more carefully. Part of the role of elders is to know Scripture well enough that they are able to keep the church in the truth in the face of Satan's repeated attempts to introduce error. Thus Paul says,

Elders must be godly men who hold firmly to and boldly teach God's Word of truth.

Paul gives five requirements for faithful elders with regard to God's Word:

1. Elders must be men of biblical understanding.

As I did last week, I must differ from John MacArthur, whom I greatly respect. He argues that *every* elder is called primarily to the ministry of the Word and therefore must have the gift of teaching (*The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Titus* {E-4 Group CD}). But in my judgment, he misinterprets 1 Timothy 5:17, "The elders

who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching." Because elders must be "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2) and, as our text states, be "able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict," he concludes that the elders who did not work hard at preaching and teaching were being negligent.

But it seems to me that Paul is recognizing that some elders are so gifted that they focus on the ministry of teaching the Word and thus (as 1 Tim. 5:18 implies), they are worthy of financial support. Other elders, while capable of teaching, focus on other areas of oversight and shepherding the flock because they are not gifted in teaching. So I would not agree that every elder must be gifted to teach (in a large group setting). But every elder must be knowledgeable enough in Scripture that he could help instruct a younger believer and correct doctrinal error when he encounters it.

But even though preaching or teaching may not be an elder's spiritual gift, every elder must be studying and growing in his understanding of God's Word. To hold fast the faithful word (ESV & NIV = "trustworthy word"), you must understand it. To understand it, you must study it. And studying it is a lifelong endeavor. Thus I would say that if a man does not have a desire to study God's Word diligently and to read books that help him understand sound doctrine, he should not be an elder.

## 2. Elders must be men of biblical conviction.

"Holding fast" means to cling to or be devoted to. John Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on Titus 1:9, p. 295) brings out the meaning by saying, "In a pastor there is demanded not only learning, but such zeal for pure doctrine as never to depart from it." Such strong convictions flow out of the first quality. The more you study the great doctrines of the faith, the more you appreciate God's grace as shown to you in Christ. The more you study, the more you understand why these doctrines are essential. You begin to see how the enemy has subtly introduced destructive heresies. As you study church history, you learn how these errors have damaged people's lives and their eternal destinies. You see men who have been willing to die tortuous deaths rather than deny these truths. All of this strengthens your own convictions to hold firmly to the truth, even in the face of strong pressure to compromise.

My recent reading has included stories of many that paid the ultimate price because of their convictions. I read *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, which in places is gruesome as it describes the torture and execution (often by burning alive) of men, women, and children who refused to deny the gospel. John Bunyan spent 12 years in jail because he refused to agree to quit preaching without the required license. He had a blind daughter, and he said that going to prison and not being able to care for this daughter was like pulling his flesh off with pincers. But he could not be silenced from proclaiming the truth of God's Word.

John Piper's *Contending for Our All* [Crossway, 2006] tells the stories of three stalwarts of the faith: Athanasius, John Owen, and J. Gresham Machen. Athanasius stood strongly against the Arian heresy, which denied the deity of Jesus Christ. At times, it seemed as if it were Athanasius against the whole world. He was forced into exile seven different times, but he stood firmly for the truth. Humanly speaking, we have Athanasius to thank for preserving the vital truth of Christ's deity (although modern cults still deny it).

We need to temper this point about holding to biblical convictions with two cautions. *First, we need to be firm and unwavering on the essentials of the faith, but we need wisdom and discernment about where and when to contend for the faith.* There are some doctrines that you must hold to and defend because if you deny them, you are no longer a Christian in the biblical sense of the word. This is not an exhaustive list, but these truths include the trinitarian nature of God; the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ; His substitutionary atonement on the cross; salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone; the inspiration, authority, and veracity of Scripture; the bodily resurrection of Jesus; His ascension into heaven; His bodily second coming to judge the earth; and, the eternal reward of believers in heaven and the eternal punishment of unbelievers in hell.

As I said, that list is not exhaustive, because there are many other errors which, if you buy into them, lead to a denial of fundamental truths. For example, the current "open theism" denies the sovereignty and omniscience of God. That has *huge* implications for your view of God, how you understand and endure trials, and God's ability to fulfill His promises.

Another area that causes a lot of heated arguments and division in the body is so-called Calvinism versus Arminianism. While I would not label most Arminians as heretics, their errors have major consequences with regard to how you view God, how you view man as a sinner, and how you understand and preach the gospel. Because the Arminian error robs God of the glory that is due to His name, it is very serious. Many church historians and theologians point out that when the church embraces Arminian theology, it often leads to the rise of liberal theology, because both errors exalt human reason above the revelation of God's Word. These things are worth contending for.

*Second, we need to contend for the truth in love.* We must not love controversy or love the feeling of winning a debate, but rather, we must love God and His truth above all and we must love people, including those who are in error. False teaching is cruel because it damages people. John Piper, (*Contending for Our All*, p. 168), concludes with an appeal for holding to the truth in love. He makes a helpful observation:

For the sake of unity and peace, therefore, Paul labors to set the churches straight on numerous issues—including quite a few that do not in themselves involve heresy. He does not exclude controversy from his pastoral writing. And he does not limit his engagement in controversy to first-order doctrines, where heresy threatens. He is like a parent to his churches. Parents do not correct and discipline their children only for felonies. Good parents long for their children to grow up into all the kindness and courtesy of mature adulthood. And since the fabric of truth is seamless, Paul knows that letting minor strands go on unraveling can eventually rend the whole garment.

Thus, elders must be men of biblical understanding and biblical conviction.

### 3. Elders must be men of biblical obedience.

It would be sheer hypocrisy, which the Bible strongly condemns, to exhort people to follow God's Word, yet not to follow it yourself. Paul goes on to expose the false teachers (1:16): "They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being

detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed." As John Calvin said of pastors (*Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, ed. and trans. by Benjamin Farley [Baker], p. 126), "For it would be better if they broke their necks while mounting the pulpit than to be unwilling to be the first to walk after God and to live peaceably with their neighbors, demonstrating that they are the sheep of our Lord Jesus Christ's flock."

Of course, no one lives in a state of sinless perfection. But, as we saw in verses 6 & 7, an elder must be "above reproach." He cannot have secret sins or be living a double life. He cannot be a nice, loving man at church and an angry, abusive man at home.

I've shared with you before a shocking thing that happened to Marla and me. We had just checked in to a pastor's conference and were settling into our room when we heard the couple in the next room yelling at one another. He was calling her horrible names and she responded in kind. Marla and I looked at one another in wide-eyed disbelief. Then I said, "I know, I'll bet they're practicing for a skit for the meeting tonight." Sadly, there was no skit. We had just heard a pastor, who should not have been in the ministry, and his wife disobeying God's Word in a terrible way.

#### 4. Elders should be men of biblical exhortation.

They must be able "to exhort in sound doctrine." The word "sound" means healthy (our word "hygienic" comes from it). Sound doctrine aims at and results in spiritual health. It does not focus on "Jewish myths and the commandments of men" (1:14). It does not get enamored with speculations about biblical prophecy that do not help people become more obedient to Christ. Rather, godly elders aim their teaching at building up people in the knowledge of God and in practical holy living.

"Doctrine" means "teaching," and includes both the doctrinal and more directly practical parts of Scripture. Some people do not like the doctrinal portions of the Word. They say, "Just give me what I need to know to have a happy marriage, rear my children, and succeed in my business. Let the theologians delve into doctrine, but just give me the practical stuff."

But, Paul's normal pattern in his epistles is to lay out the doctrine in the first half before he moves on to the practical in the sec-

ond half. Keep in mind that he was writing to many who were illiterate slaves and to the common people who made up the early churches. Yet he thought that the believers in Rome needed to know Romans 1-11 for their spiritual health before he “got practical” in chapter 12. The fact is, the great doctrines of the Bible are immensely practical. Without them, you are building your Christian life with no foundation. Again I will say that you do have a theology. The question is, to what extent is your theology biblical?

“Exhort” may mean either to urge to obedience and change, or to encourage or comfort. It can have the flavor of imploring, appealing to, or entreating. Paul uses the same word in 2 Timothy 4:2, where after urging Timothy to preach the word, he adds, “reprove, rebuke, *exhort*, with great patience and instruction.” It implies that our hearts must be in our teaching, so that people sense the urgency of these important truths.

Thus elders must be men of biblical understanding, conviction, obedience, and exhortation.

5. Elders must be men of biblical courage to confront error.

Calvin (p. 296) says, “The pastor ought to have two voices: one, for gathering the sheep; and another, for warding off and driving away wolves and thieves. The Scripture supplies him with the means of doing both....” Some think that we should always be positive and focus on the positive. But to teach positively is not enough. Paul says that we must also refute false teaching. We must not be purposely offensive, but neither should we be so nice and polite that we end up watering down or compromising the truth.

The apostles sometimes named the names of false teachers or dangerous men (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:17; 4:14; 3 John 9). I find that if I talk in general terms, people don’t get it. They go out and buy the books of false teachers. So I have to get specific at times.

When Paul confronted the Galatian heresy, he did not say, “The Judaizers are good brothers and we agree on so much. Can’t we just set aside the few areas where we disagree and come together on the basis of what we share in common?” Rather, he denounced them as preaching a false gospel and pronounced anathema on them (Gal. 1:6-9). John Piper tells the story of J. Gresham

Machen, who stood strongly for the truth when the Presbyterian Church was being infested with liberalism. Machen said,

Men tell us that our preaching should be positive and not negative, that we can preach the truth without attacking error. But if we follow that advice we shall have to close our Bible and desert its teachings. The New Testament is a polemic book almost from beginning to end.... Every really great Christian utterance, it may almost be said, is born in controversy. It is when men have felt compelled to take a stand against error that they have risen to the really great heights in the celebration of truth (*Contending for Our All*, p. 146).

### Conclusion

The great reformer, Martin Luther, did not like controversy, but he came to see both from Scripture and history that it is necessary. He wrote,

When Christians are not doing battle with the devil, or him who bites the heel, that is not a good sign, for it means that he who bites the heel is at peace and has his own way. But when he who bites the heel rages and has no peace, it is a sign that he, being under attack, shall be conquered, for it is Christ who is attacking his house. Therefore whoever desires to see the Christian Church existing in quiet peace, entirely without crosses, without heresy, and without factions, will never see it thus, or else he must view the false church of the devil as the real church (from *Luther's Works* 34:215, cited by Eric Gritsch, *Martin—God's Court Jester* [Fortress Press, 1983], p. 178).

Thus elders must be godly men who hold firmly to and boldly teach God's Word of truth. You can easily find churches that will give you nice, uplifting, positive messages about how to succeed in life. But such messages will expose you to the many winds of false doctrine that are blowing in our day. To be strong in the Lord, you must be in a church that exhorts in sound doctrine and refutes those who contradict. May all of our elders be men of God's Word!

## Application Questions

1. How can you know whether or not an issue is worth contending for? What guidelines should govern?
2. Where is the line between contending for the truth versus being contentious? How can we do the former without the latter?
3. Since unity in the church is important, how can we take a stand for biblical truth and yet preserve unity? (See Eph. 4:1-6, 13.)
4. Why must sound doctrine be the foundation for practical Christian living?

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