

Sound Doctrine
Titus 1:10-16

Few issues have caused more controversy within the Presbyterian Church than the proper qualifications for elders. This has been the cause of denominational divisions among us – for example, the Presbyterian Church in America, or PCA, takes what Paul’s first letter to Timothy seriously and refuses to ordain women as elders. Today, different presbyteries within our own denomination are wondering if people who fail to uphold the Biblical standard of marriage should be eligible for ordination.

But all of these questions hinge first and foremost on what it is that we think elders should do. For an elder is not simply called to be a member of the board of directors of a small, local non-profit corporation. No, in the Biblical view an elder is an overseer of the congregation’s spiritual health.

And such oversight necessarily involves being able to do two things. An elder must exhort the believers with sound doctrine, encouraging them to trust in Christ and to live for His glory, not least by setting a good example for them. But an elder must also be willing to speak out against those who refuse to embrace the teachings of Scripture, and pointing out where they have gone wrong.

Today, Paul goes into greater detail about that second, admittedly much less agreeable part of an elder’s job. But however unpleasant it may be, we have to admit that elders still need to confront erroneous ideas.

Here, for example, is part of the current statement of belief from a congregation in Sausalito, California, a congregation that belongs to our own denomination:

“ Jesus Christ is the foundation to our path to God, but we recognize that He represents one of the many ways to know God. We recognize the faiths of other people who have other names for the pathway to the Divine....We don't believe in converting anyone from one set of beliefs to another.”

Oh, but that’s out in California. We don’t need to worry about such wacky ideas. Really? Here’s what a minister member of a presbytery in Tennessee – a presbytery in our own Synod – has to say on his blog:

At this point on my journey, I find that the Christ of creed is flat, dated, and oppressive for the most part....I find the historical Jesus a good resource. He wasn't perfect....He died young before he could mature and reflect on his vision and mission. He appeared to be impulsive. He cut himself off from his roots and demanded that others do the same ("let the dead bury their own dead") and it is doubtful that he could have sustained an itinerant lifestyle through

middle or old age.

But he stood up against the powerful on behalf of the marginalized and that is enough for me. I don't need much more religion than that. I certainly don't need miracles or afterlife. I don't need supernatural beings telling me what to do. Nor do I need supposedly supernaturally derived books as proof-texts for decisions I need to make on my own.

No, the sad news is that there have always been those who contradict the sound teaching found in the Scriptures. Because error and heresy weren't just found in Ancient Crete, elders must continue to be vigilant, ready to take a firm stand for the truth.

But why are Christians so willing to listen to this stuff? Why do Christians continue to fall into sin? Because we continue to feel the pull of the flesh, because our old sin nature remains all too active in our lives. Now, all of us don't feel this pull in the same way, because we as individuals aren't all tempted by the same sorts of sins. Just so, different cultures seem to consider different sorts of sins to be more or less socially acceptable. But if we would oppose sin in our individual lives, and if we would take a firm stand for truth in the culture as a whole, it is helpful to know the sorts of sins we are up against.

In verse 12, Paul does this by quoting from the ancient poet Epimenides, mentioning some sins that were particularly widespread among the members of Titus' congregations, sins that were common in Cretan culture. First among these was lying – in fact, lying was so common among the Cretans that the Ancient Greeks had turned the word Crete into a synonym for lying. The Cretans also seem to have been inordinately fond of food – in verse 12 “slow bellies” means the people were lazy gluttons. In saying whatever was necessary to get what they want and in focusing so much on the pleasures of the table, they were acting like evil beasts, just living according to their most basic animal instincts.

So, if we were to make a similar list of socially acceptable sins in our culture, what would we include? Probably not lying – oh, it's common enough, but it's still scandalous enough to get politicians who bend the truth into trouble. Gluttony might make our list of most popular sins – after all, we Americans have many more health problems caused by obesity than by starvation. Still, many people who are overweight see that as a problem to be solved, rather than an achievement to be celebrated.

So, what sorts of sins are acceptable in the culture around us? In what areas do our own lives fail to measure up to God's standards? It is the job of your elders to point these things out. Just as Paul called it like he saw it were it came to Ancient Cretan society, elders are supposed to

be the conscience of the culture, applying their knowledge of the Scripture to all of us, cutting through the self-deception of sin to help us all see what parts of our lives need to be brought more into line with God's will. To the extent that we allow our elders to do this, to ask us the hard questions and to challenge us to lives of greater holiness, we will grow in our faith and thus we will grow closer to God.

But elders also need to confront problems within the leadership of the church. For Titus, one of the main problems facing his congregations was false teachers. In verse 10, Paul mentions that these false teachers were "of the circumcision," which means they were of Jewish descent. And in verse 14, Paul indicates that they were teaching people to pay attention to some sort of Jewish fables. When we put these two ideas together, we can draw the conclusion that these false teachers were probably telling people that, if they wanted to be good Christians, it would be necessary to adhere to some of the sorts of rules that the Pharisees tried so desperately to follow.

But beyond such a general idea, we don't know exactly what it was that they were teaching, and they may not have known themselves – in verse 10 Paul criticizes "vain talkers," people who say things they don't necessarily understand. The same thing is true with so many of our conflicts within the church today – people in fact tend to become quite muddled whenever they turn away from the Scriptures, whenever they start teaching whatever makes sense to them or whatever agrees with their experience. It's not always possible to figure out exactly what such false teachers believe.

And yet Paul calls elders to confront these false teachers, not least because their intentions are often much less than pure. In verse 10, he says that they are deceivers, making every effort to lead people astray. In verse 11, he accuses them of saying false things in order to enrich themselves in some way. This is not as outlandish as it might seem. Who knows how many ministers over the years have lost faith in the truth of the Scriptures but kept on preaching just because they can't afford to lose their job?

But since we can't always be sure of someone's bad intentions, Paul urges elders to identify false teachers by examining the way they live. In verse 16, he admits that these false teachers profess to know God, but at the same time he points out that their works deny God. In short, what they do gives the lie to what they say. Such inconsistency should be a clear sign for us: no one whose life is radically out of agreement with God's word should be an authority for any Christian. Instead, Paul says that the false teachers' disobedience to God renders them completely unqualified to do any of the good works that they may talk about.

But how are we supposed to know who is living the Christian life with integrity? Once again, it is our elders who are responsible for helping us make sense out of all of this. Because of their knowledge of the Scripture, and because of the love and respect we have for them, which is based in no small part on their own lives which are above reproach, it is our elders who are best equipped to steer us away from false teachers. It is our elders who can best help us discern to whom we should listen and why. And so unless we want to try to make sense out of the increasing number of truth claims that are clamoring for our attention, unless we are confident in our own virtue and in our own knowledge of God's word, we need to follow the lead of our elders.

But what if we don't? What if we ignore our elders when they try to confront us about the sin in our lives or in our culture? What if our elders refuse to confront the false teachers that remain all too common within the Church? Verse 15 tells us that to those who become defiled and unbelieving by following such false teachings, everything becomes impure to them. Because they drift away from the faith, even their minds and consciences become defiled, made unclean. Verse 11 goes further, saying that whole houses, which means that whole families can be subverted, upset, or brought down to ruin. The worst thing we can do for ourselves or for our families is to fall under the influence of those who are trying to lead us away from the teachings of Christ.

And so what should the elders do when they identify false teachers within the Church? Within the Christian life there is undoubtedly a time for gentleness and patience, but there is also a time for swift action. We recall that our Lord Jesus was often very abrupt in his dealings with false teachers, pronouncing numerous woes on the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy. In a similar vein, in verse 11, Paul tells Titus that the mouths of false teachers should be stopped. The elders should therefore do whatever it takes to prevent these people from spreading their false teachings in the Church. In verse 13, Paul tells Titus that those living in sin and those who spread false teachings should be rebuked sharply, that their evil words and ways should be pointed out in no uncertain terms.

But even while our elders must stand firm against false teachers and stand firm for the truth, they must never forget that the purpose of all church discipline is the restoration of those who have fallen into error and sin. In verse 14, Paul makes it plain that he desires people to stop listening to the commandments of men. He wants people to stop turning away from the truth. And why? Verse 13 makes clear that the reason that Titus is to rebuke those who teach and practice error is so that they may be sound in the faith, sound not only in what they think, but in what they believe and in whom they trust. Godly elders must rebuke those who teach and believe what is wrong so

that they might start believing what is right, so that they might trust Jesus instead of trusting false teachers or believing false teachings.

This, then, is the greatest reason that those of us who are called to be elders must speak the truth, even to those who are headed in the wrong direction. This is why we must confront those who have begun to believe false teachings – because it is never the loving thing to do to allow someone to head towards ruin without trying to stop him. Speaking the truth may not always be easy, and speaking the truth may not always be welcome. But one way or another, it is always the loving thing to try to convince people to follow Jesus.

Now, most of the rest of the letter seeks to flesh out what the elders should teach the rest of the church to believe and to do, going into detail about what sound doctrine actually is. Some of those things will make sense to us, but some of those things may give us pause, especially when Paul tells us about the way men and women and children should behave. We may well wonder, just as those Ancient Cretans did, what is really the truth about what we should believe, and about the way we should live.

So I suppose the same question faces us that faced the people of Ancient Crete: to whom will we listen? Will we coast along with the culture, doing what feels good and believing only what seems right to us? Or will we listen to the sound doctrine Paul is giving to us? Will we make up our own rules as we go along, or will we live our lives in accordance with the teaching we find in the Word of God?