



Biblical Qualifications Integrity (part 2)

by Chuck Gianotti

(Note: although Psalm 15 is not listed as a specific qualification for shepherds of the church, it is without question that the character trait of integrity is essential to being an elder.)

He who speaks the truth from his heart (Psalm 15:2a)

The third trait of the Psalm 15 man has to do with inner truthfulness. In another psalm, David puts it this way, "Surely you desire truth in the inner parts..." (Psalm 51:6). Truth at the deepest level is as necessary to a life of integrity as air is necessary for a balloon. Truth is the substance of integrity. It is not just one of many traits, the sum of which make up integrity. Truth permeates every corner, every action, every thought in the life of a man of integrity.

At this juncture, we must equivocate somewhat. As mentioned before, integrity is a process the end of which will be attained only in glory. The goal this side of glory is progressive movement to being a man of pervasive truth. Like learning to ride a bike, you may fall off from time to time, but you keep getting back on.

Now, truth has to do both with telling the truth in our relationships, but also in acknowledge the truth about ourselves, whether good or bad. For example, David displayed great integrity when he acknowledged the extent of his sinfulness—

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. (Ps 51:4-5).

Yes, integrity comes into play even in how truthful we are about our inner failures. As elders, we ought not to portray that we have no or few faults. There must be some degree of transparency, lest we be seen as presenting ourselves outwardly that is contrary to our inward reality.

Yet, as elders, we shouldn't be airing our "dirty laundry," should we? Too often in the Christian life we fall into the trap of thinking that keeping the law will make us spiritual. That includes so-called "Christian laws" based on NT teachings that are no longer moored to grace, but to fleshly legalism – as though righteousness and holiness now belongs to those who "do" the right things. The truth, of which we must remind ourselves continually, is that the law condemns us, even when disguised in Christian garb. As elders, when we treat the NT instructions as a form of law, we

fall convey a law based spirituality to those for whom Christ died. The only "law" for Christians is the new commandment, "law of love" (John 13:34, 1 John 2:7). All else flows from that. Isn't this simply a reinforcement of the two great commandments Jesus spoke of?

The truth of the matter is that we continuously fail the 2nd trait of the Psalm 15 man, namely "He who does what is righteous" (see previous article in this series). Therein lies the truthfulness of integrity. How often do we hear the mystics of old proclaim: "I am but a sinner saved by grace." Notice, following the example of Paul (1 Tim 1:15, see also Romans 7:14-25), the present tense of the admission. "I am ... a sinner." As elders, we must lead the way in truthfulness at this level. Not the condescending "I am your humble servant ..." but a real honesty where an elder can freely when he sins against others. Too often we are muzzled by the fear that someone will jump up and assert, "You are not qualified to be an elder, by your own mouth ..." But, the truth shall set us elders free to portray the genuine integrity of souls that real means it, "I am a sinner saved by grace ... and what I did is just another example of it." One elder said recently, "Guys, I am so sorry that I got hot headed at our last meeting. I wasn't listening to what you were saying, just pushing for my own agenda. Can we start that conversation all over again?" What the flock of God needs is more examples of David like honesty, the model in elders of how a godly man deals with his sin.

Now, obviously, some sinful acts (especially when they are characteristic of an elder) may result in removal from being an elder. But, there are a whole host of sins for which disqualification may not be necessary, but honestly still is required. Elders are not to be quarrelsome, but sometimes we do quarrel. That's doesn't mean we are immediately disqualified, unless it becomes a pattern of behavior. Better that we honestly "fess" up to it as soon as it happens, so we can grow more Christlike. If we really believe that we are not perfected until our graduation to glory, then honesty like this makes sense.

As with the rest of the OT, Psalm 15 reflects a standard that is nothing other than the character of God, Himself. He *is* the truth (John 16:4). As his disciples and as those leaders of God's people that desire to be Psalm 15 kind of men, we desire to be like Him, that is, being truthful. To the degree we live our lives in truthfulness, we will increasingly feel at home in God's presence – which is what Psalm 15 is all about.

Some may object that our "comfortableness" in His presence is based

(Continued on page 4)

The words “elder” and “deacon” bring to mind all sorts of ideas for the average person in today’s world; perhaps a cult or a holdover from a bygone era? Nevertheless these terms describe the leadership in a normal Christian church! The earliest missionaries appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:23), elders and deacons existed together in the church at Philippi (Phil. 1:1) and Paul likely thought of them as working together when he penned instructions about church order to Timothy, his son in the faith (I Tim. 3).

Who are they, what is their function and how can they serve together in harmony?

Origins

The word “elder” simply means an older or more mature man. Synagogues in Bible times depended on the older men of the congregation for wise counsel and decision making, so it is understandable that the earliest churches employed the term for their spiritual leaders. One can trace the transition in leadership from “apostles” to “apostles and elders” to “elders” in the book of Acts. The New Testament pattern for leadership in the church is a plurality of men called elders or overseers.

The word “deacon” means servant, also appearing from the beginning as a plurality of men designated as assistants to the elders. The most natural explanation of their origin seems to be the record in Acts 6 where seven men were chosen to protect the apostles from becoming entangled in temporal concerns of the church. Although the noun “deacon” (diakonos) is not used in the passage, the related words for “ministry” (diakonia) and the verb “to serve” (diakoneo) occur three times, so the inference that this passage presents the first deacons is reasonable and adopted by most expositors.

Function

Space does not allow for an extended discussion of the duties of these servants (see the 5 articles in ESN 2000 on the work of elders, and “The Blessing of Deacons” ESN March, 2004). However, a brief summary of their respective spheres of labor will help us understand how closely they might work together in

the church.

The elders are responsible for the spiritual feeding, leading and protection of the flock, described fittingly as “taking the oversight.” The deacons tend to the financial and temporal needs of the people with an emphasis that seemed to be (at least in the beginning) on the poor and the widows. In this way provision was made for the whole spectrum of “people needs” that exist in any fellowship of believers. This is consistent with the example set by the Lord Jesus during His earthly ministry. He brought a message of life and hope to the world but He constantly ministered to the needs of body and soul; He “went about doing good...” (Acts 10:38 KJV).

Some smaller assemblies today feel no need for a recognized group of deacons. It is true that the earliest deacons were not chosen until “the number of the disciples was multiplied...” (Acts 6:1) However spiritual leaders should always be discipling the younger men of the church who can eventually replace them; working with a recognized group of deacons is one good way to do that.

Inevitability of Overlap in Function

Two extremes have always plagued the work of the church. One is the failure to provide adequate leadership to meet the needs; the other is to over-organize and quench the work of the Holy Spirit as He would energize the ordinary men and women of the congregation. A balance must be preserved!

That this is not just “business world mentality,” as some would call it, is shown by a careful look at the record. About the deacon Stephen, it is recorded that he was “full of faith and power” and “did great wonders and miracles among the people.” In defending the faith, we read that his opposers “were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke” (Acts 6:8,10).

Shortly thereafter, it is recorded of the deacon Philip that he “went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them” with marked results; (Acts 8:5). One might have expected these highly spiritual ministries to be confined to the apostles, at least for a few years while the newly appointed deacons served an apprenticeship! But instead we see how freely and effectively they be-

gan to share in the spiritual work of the church!

On the other hand, when news of an impending famine reached the church in Antioch, and a collection was taken to help the poor saints in Judea, it is recorded concerning the gift that the donors “sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.” (Acts 11:30). Why didn’t they send it to the deacons? Again, an overlap of ministries is evident.

Opinions vary on this, but these incidents show that the church should be careful not to create mutually exclusive departments with competing authorities to control them. Clearly there is a spiritual side to the work of deacons, both in the development of their own gifts as Christians and in the administration of the temporal affairs of the church. Likewise the elders have liberty to be involved in all the spheres of the life of the church, particularly whenever they discern that actions and decisions have a spiritual impact on the work, as is so often the case.

Thus we see that overlap in areas of leadership is inevitable, in fact essential. As partners in the fellowship of the Lord’s work, leaders must learn the skills of communication, deference, and team work to be truly effective. But it is just here that unity and harmony may come under attack from the adversary.

Working in Harmony

Whenever groups of people serve a common need together and have the authority necessary to function, the potential for friction exists. Recognizing how problems can gain a foothold in the church is crucial. We are not to be “ignorant of his [Satan’s] devices.” (II Cor. 2:11).

A great deal has been written on the subject of preserving unity in the church. Without wanting to over simplify the matter, the observation seems justified that most problems stem from a single source: pride, the lack of a humble spirit in the servant. Those who lead in the church must be vigilant lest a spirit of jealousy or competition arise in the mind and take shelter in the heart. The Lord Jesus quickly recognized this in His disciples and spoke out against it. Several Scripture passages record the discussions of the disciples about who would become the greatest in the kingdom.

Continued on page 3

Dealing With Criticism

by Ruth Spender

No one likes criticism, that harsh, often emotionally charged and sometimes accusing interchange which takes place when individuals disagree on an issue or idea. If you are in a position where you deal with people, you will encounter negative feedback; it is an unavoidable fact of life!

How can we handle this problem in a constructive, godly manner? In this issue of Wives' Corner we want to think especially about how we can deal with criticism directed towards our husbands. We know how it makes us feel, but how should we react? Because elders are leaders, they are often the target of unfair comments. Knowing this, it is good for us to develop a plan of action so we aren't responding out of our old nature when criticism comes our way.

I will never forget the first time I heard someone loudly criticize my husband in front of others after he delivered the Sunday morning message at our chapel. A middle age mother of four was offended that my husband would speak on how to raise godly children when we did not have any of our own. I remember the sense of injustice followed by a strong desire to defend my husband. As I tried to deal with the rush of emotions I experienced, I began to understand that there

were deeper issues in this lady's life. While she was the wife of a leader in the assembly, her home and family were not in order. She was lashing out in her own defense. My husband reminded her that God's truth is eternal and our experience or lack of it was not the basis of his message. She seemed unconvinced. For some time I found myself avoiding that woman, but the Lord convicted me that I had not truly forgiven her. The principles I learned from that encounter have served me well through our years of ministry. I would like to share some of them with you.

Sometimes when we or our husbands have been criticized, we are so hurt we cannot see the big picture. This is where we can be a tremendous help to each other. The first thing of course, is to pray together about what has happened. This will not only give you insight into dealing with the problem, it will draw you closer together as a couple. Only our Heavenly Father can give us the heart of love we need to deal with someone who may have been very unkind. Stand back and take a hard, objective look to see if there is an element of truth to what has been said. Perhaps some changes are warranted in our life or ministry. We have seen critical atti-

tudes diffused simply by thanking the person for approaching us personally rather than gossiping behind our back.

Try to draw the other person out. Hear what he or she is really saying. Is there a legitimate issue that should be addressed? Is this a cry for help or perhaps an expression of jealousy or hurt? Are we dealing with an insecure person or a young believer? Consider the person's background, life experiences and present circumstances. We should not be so sensitive that all we can think about are the accusations leveled against us.

Only after a prayerful review of the issues can we put the problem behind us and "remember it no more." This does not mean we will necessarily forget the incident ever occurred, but we chose to let it go. We refuse to rehearse it in our minds, or hold it against the person. When we have done our best to clear up the problem, we leave the rest with the Lord.

There have been times when we have done all in our power to bring about a resolution, but without success. Like Peter we would say, "let them that suffer according to the will of God, commit the keeping of their soul to Him in well doing as unto a faithful Creator" (1 Peter 4:19). God is the final judge and we should endeavor to rest in that. 

Harmony (cont. from page 2)

In response, the Lord's admonition is as needed today as in biblical times: "You know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you, but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister, And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant..." (Matt. 20:25-27).

The desire to use God given authority to control others, to have the prominent place is always a temptation. How can church leaders guard against these natural inclinations of the heart? Here are some questions for personal consideration. They might also make for interesting discussion in leadership meetings:

Questions to Ponder

- Is it my firm conviction that the sins of pride and envy grieve the very Spirit on whose power we depend for blessing

in the church? Can I acknowledge that I am commanded to humble myself as something within my power to obey? (1 Pet. 5:5).

- When difficulties arise, do I make it my practice to judge myself rather than my brother; to remind myself that the beam may be in my own eye as I think of the mote in his?

- As together we face decisions and projects in the work, can I set as a goal the inner desire to make my brothers look competent rather than call attention to their short comings?

- Do I realize how demoralizing the sin of evil speaking is, and do I resolve not to engage in it?

- Am I willing to give a brother a "heads up" to prepare him for a difficult situation?

Many similar questions might be asked, but in the end it all comes down to

loving the Lord Jesus and desiring that His mind might be reproduced in us. There can be no true growth and blessing in the church where malice and bitterness exist among those who lead. On the other hand, seemingly great deficiencies in goods or talent will prove no obstacle for the Lord as He walks among the lamp stands inspecting the light they emit (Rev. 2,3).

Conclusion

In describing the harmony that should exist among brethren, David, in Psalm 133, adds the interesting insight that, "there the Lord commanded the blessing..." (verse 3). May the Lord give elders and deacons the grace to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace." (Eph. 4:3). 

Integrity (cont. from page 1)

only on His mercy and grace, not on human efforts. After all, we are to “*approach the throne of grace so that we may receive mercy and find grace...*” (Heb 4:16). This is true and makes sense only with the understanding that those who truly receive mercy and find grace are those who come to God in honesty of soul. God’s grace is not blind to two-faced hypocrisy. Neither God nor sinner is fooled. A person will have no confidence entering God’s presence if he does not believe he needs grace or mercy. Confidence comes only in the acknowledgement of our need for – and acceptance of -- grace and mercy.

I remember years ago watching a dramatized discussion among Christians about an unbeliever with obnoxious, imposing behavior. One of the Christians, relatively new to the faith out of a worldly background, was trying to encourage the other Christians to be more accepting of the unbeliever, for after all, he is in need of God’s transforming grace just as we all are. Another believer in the group, one of long standing, angrily blurted out, “I may need God’s grace, but I don’t need it as much as that disgusting man.” Therein is the rub! We all need God’s grace just as much as the worst sinner we can imagine. That includes elders of long standing as well as new believers and God-rejecting unbeliever!

This level of truthfulness should permeate everything we think, say and do. It means being quick to say, “I am wrong, please forgive me.” Somehow we tend to think such an admission cause us to be diminished in the eyes of the other elders or believers. True, it is an admission that we are less than perfect or, to put it more biblically, a sinner. Satan would love to convince us that being spiritual mature means

never having to admit “I was wrong.” The fact of the matter is that we elders can sometimes be guilty of the most basic sins. For example, a man of integrity will admit the truth, “I was self-serving in our last elder’s meeting when I pushed for my own agenda. Will you fellows forgive me?” Or, “It wasn’t right the way I stonewalled what the rest of you felt the Lord was leading us to do.” Or, “Please forgive me for not listening to you. Can you explain your view again so that I can understand.” “I am sorry that I distorted or misrepresented the truth in any way that caused other people to be misled in their thinking.”

He who has no slander on his tongue

A Psalm 15 kind of man, a man of integrity, does not go about gaining and giving information about another for the purpose of harming that person’s reputation. The Hebrew word translated “slander” has the basic meaning of to “go about,” here used in the sense of going out of one’s way to gain information in a more or less covert manner. The KJV renders it “backbite.”

Elders, being men of integrity, should not be men who slander others. Does this mean that elders should never speak among themselves of anyone’s negative behavior? Not at all. There are times when an open discussion is necessary so that problems and conflicts can be dealt with from a position of reality and truth. For elders to maintain a distorted sense of “secrecy” can seriously hamper conflict resolution in the church. However, when it is necessary to talk about people among the elder, the motivation should be love for all the flock of God, the standard should be truth and the

goal should be a positive resolution or outcome. The difference with slander, however, is that the motive is to harm another person’s reputation, the standard of truth is ignored and the goal is building up oneself.

Having said all this, as elders we often have people “bend our ears” with their slanted perspective on others, especially during a conflict. We must resist the urge to believe such things at face value by passing them on without careful investigation. Years ago I heard an itinerate preacher asserting confidently in private conversation that a certain Christian organization had changed their doctrinal statement. He had disagreed with some of the practices of the organization, for which there was room for healthy debate. However the charge of doctrinal error was of a much more serious nature. Upon further questioning, the itinerate preacher assured me of the veracity of his source of this information, but was unwilling to identify who the source was. I immediately called the president of the organization in question, who assured me the doctrinal statement had not changed since he had been involved, nor did anyone in the organization espouse the alleged doctrinal error. Following the example of Chloe’s house (1 Cor 1:10), I reported who the individual was who was spreading the falsehood. However, the damage was done and many continued to believe the organization had fallen into doctrinal error. “He who conceals hatred has lying lips, and he who spreads slander is a fool” (Pr 10:18). Let this not be said of us as elders!



ELDERS’ SHOPNOTES

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