

## Christian Leadership, Sin, and Restoration: Reflections on 1 Timothy and Titus

Mako A. Nagasawa

Last modified: May 24, 2017

### Introduction: The Character of a Christian Leader

Recent events have brought to light the need to answer a few questions. What are the leadership standards for Christian character? Why are those standards important? And what process is best for a Christian leader who breaks those standards? These questions are important to answer for any church community moving forward.

Ultimately, the Scriptures that are most important are 1 Timothy 3 – 5 and Titus 1. This is because they contain the material about the character and ministry of the New Testament *elder*. In New Testament times, when Christians met in house churches, the term *elder* was used to designate trustworthy leaders in the broader community. In each of these letters, Paul is writing to a younger protégé how to identify leaders for Christian communities. These instructions to Timothy in Ephesus and Titus in Crete are almost identical.

<sup>3:1</sup> It is a trustworthy statement: if any man or woman (the Greek pronoun is *tis*, which means ‘anyone, male or female’<sup>1</sup>) aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work *he* desires<sup>2</sup> to do. <sup>2</sup> An overseer, then, must be above reproach, monogamous (literally ‘one-woman man,’ or monogamous), temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,<sup>3</sup> not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. <sup>4</sup> *He* must be one who manages *his* own household well, keeping *his* children under control with all dignity<sup>5</sup> (but if a *man* does not know how to manage *his* own household, how will *he* take care of the church of God?),<sup>6</sup> and not a new convert, so that *he* will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. <sup>7</sup> And *he* must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that *he* will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. (1 Timothy 3:1 – 7)

<sup>1:5</sup> For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, <sup>6</sup> namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. <sup>7</sup> For the overseer must be above reproach as God’s steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain,<sup>8</sup> but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled,<sup>9</sup> holding 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... (Titus 1:5 – 9)

I’d like to make several observations here. First, high character standards are appropriate to *protect the church community*. If a pastor/elder is not ‘free from the love of money,’ s/he will likely treat rich people much more nicely than less rich people, which will lead to pain in the community. This is why sinning while being a leader of a church is different from sinning while being a member. Some people may feel quite loved by the leader and are protective of her/him. Meanwhile others feel utterly hurt and betrayed. Some may feel mad at those who feel hurt, claiming they are exaggerating. Still others might feel guilty that they covered something up for some period of time. Others might be angry at those who knew something and didn’t say something earlier; etc. These divisions in the community reflect the fact that people have had to relate to that church leader in very different ways. That is why consistency and demonstrated freedom from addictive tendencies are called ‘self-controlled’ in Titus 1:8 and ‘temperate, prudent, respectable... not pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable’ in 1 Timothy 3:2 – 3. The Christian leader strives to treat people consistently so that the community is not divided based on their experience of her or him. This person is proactive about telling others about any weaknesses or areas of growth because it helps people in advance have an easier time reconciling any differences in how they felt treated. He or she has learned to submit to Jesus in hard times of personal challenge, even when there was no apparent social or financial reward for doing

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul does not use the word *aner* (‘man/husband’) or the word *arsenes* (‘male’). He is deliberately gender-neutral.

<sup>2</sup> Although in the New American Standard Bible translation, the text reads ‘he desires,’ in Greek, there is only a conjugated verb ‘desires’ with no pronoun present here. This carries through for all the pronouns in 3:1 – 7 which are translated by NASB to be the masculine pronoun, which gives an overly narrow impression that elders can only be men. Like in Spanish, Greek can use a conjugated verb for an action without identifying who is doing that action. The ‘who’ (i.e. the pronoun) must be inferred from the last available subject, which in 3:1 is a person who is *either male or female*.

so. This is someone who has dealt with conflict, suffering, and disappointment faithfully, prayerfully, and even-handedly so that the larger church community is not a casualty of its leader's uneven emotional life.

From a practical standpoint, a senior church leader committing sexual sin is particularly important to consider. Consider the situation of a heterosexual man who leads a small group for men. He sleeps with his girlfriend on one occasion. But he confesses it immediately, apologizes to the men in his small group by identifying it as a sin, and commits to an accountability structure while she does, too. He might be removed from his position as small group leader at that time, or at some later point if he ignores his accountability structure, lies about something else, or sins sexually again. But this man is ostensibly not in danger of committing sexual sin with *the men in his small group*.

By contrast, an elder/pastor of an entire congregation *is in precisely that danger*. He (or she, as the case may be) is a type of coach and care-giver to people of both genders. He is in a relationship of authority to them, as he can invite people to meet with him while he asks deeply personal questions, conveying the appearance of safety with the authority of a moral guide. His encouragement and counsel affect their understanding of what is emotionally and ethically healthy. He shapes people's self-perceptions and other-perceptions. This is a type of trust, and it is sacred. A woman with past hurt from fathers, coaches, teachers, brothers, or other authority figures (which is increasingly common these days) is typically drawn to such a man because he is well-regarded by the community within an atmosphere of trust. In most cases, it is his job description as a Christian leader to notice and develop her God-given gifts, and to interpret her story. And he may be the person with whom the 'buck stops' – or one of them – for the local church community. In most work situations, if you have a problem with your supervisor, you can go talk to the Human Resources Department or your supervisor's supervisor. But in a church body, who do you go talk to when you want to register a concern with your pastor, or church elder? (By the way, this is why I believe that the healthiest model of church governance is not a senior pastor model, but a board of elders who share the responsibility of holding each other to account, and shares the hiring, supervision, and firing of paid pastoral staff.)

If a male pastor cannot be trusted to recognize when a woman needs support from other women, or from a formal counselor – which is an issue of professional competence – then he is a danger to those he leads. Or if he cannot be trusted to keep God-given mental, emotional, verbal, and physical boundaries – which is an issue of character – then he is also a danger to those he leads. Those in local or denominational leadership over him would be irresponsible to place him immediately back in any such role, especially without an incremental re-earning of trust, along with a very clear structure of accountability and supervision transparent to all. Consider: Would you want this person to meet privately with you and/or your spouse, your children, your friends, and non-Christian acquaintances who you want to come to Jesus?

Furthermore, sex with an illicit partner is typically kept hidden for some time. To do that, one must use deception and other deeply problematic motivations and behaviors. At least for a time, he must encourage at least one other person – his illicit sexual partner – to be deceptive as well, just to keep the charade going. Thus, a person who commits sexual sin almost always is self-deceived in some way. Deceiving others tends to flow out of that place in one's self.

Second, high character standards for Christian leadership protect the *person*. That may sound counter-intuitive. Many people don't think of Christian ministry as burdensome. For instance, ministers tend to have a fair degree of autonomy to set their own schedules, and are typically given a wide latitude of trust and respect by others. But on the other hand, ministry is saturated with disappointment about other people's bad choices. Christian pastors and elders receive lots of criticism, mediate conflicts, counsel people about their trauma, preside over funerals when old tensions between family members erupt at delicate moments, watch evangelism happen unsuccessfully all the time, do kids programs when their parents treat it like childcare, log long hours just setting up chairs, etc. Growing a church community is fraught with challenges.

So the Christian leader must demonstrate sustained freedom from addictive substances and behaviors, even under personal pressure. The candidate must be 'not addicted to wine' and, equivalently, 'not accused of dissipation' (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:6). That certainly includes a person who uses recreational drugs and substances as a replacement for finding relief and rest in the Lord. People abuse substances to cover over pain, stress, and anxiety. Money and spending can also become an addictive substance, and the candidate must be 'free from the love of money' and 'not fond of sordid gain' (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7). Deeper patterns of sin, idolatry, self-protection,

and deception lie underneath addictive behaviors. Addictive behaviors can emerge under the attractions and pressures of ministry.

A person with an addiction-prone personality can use ministry itself as a vehicle to try to meet his or her own needs. The person may feel a deep, unexamined desire to be at the center of things, to be needed, to be respected, to be in control and be certain about something rather than accepting uncertainty, to be appreciated by the opposite sex, to be seen as competent or in a certain light which was not obtained in a non-ministry career, to resolve parent issues, or some such thing. So when someone has sinned against the character requirements given in 1 Timothy and Titus, resignation from a church leadership role is appropriate to *protect the person*. Something about the role itself is hurting the person, because something inside the person is not right.

Third, the candidate must have demonstrated proven character *for quite some time*. Time is a critical factor that is marked by each of the key relationships that are considered important to demonstrate Christian character. Being ‘the husband of one wife’ is literally in Greek, ‘a one-woman man’ or ‘monogamous.’<sup>3</sup> The term could also be a shorthand that includes the case of the woman being considered for leadership as well, as the non-gendered pronoun in 1 Timothy 3:1 indicates; the character requirements placed on an ‘older widow’ who would be head of household and who could be placed on a ‘list’ of those who are financially supported by the church community (1 Timothy 5:3 – 16) also make clear that women could be elders.<sup>4</sup> But the term does seem to rule out someone who has not been ‘monogamous’ at least for some significant period of time, like a newlywed. How long? References to the candidate parenting children into the faith in an emotionally healthy way (1 Timothy 3:4 – 5; Titus 1:6), not being a new convert (1 Timothy 3:6; Titus 1:9), and having credibility in witnessing to non-Christians (1 Timothy 3:7; Titus 1:9) indicate that Timothy is to look for a person who has had a fairly substantial time period to establish proven Christian character. How many years must pass before a person is not a ‘new convert’ any longer? There might be a range of faithful ways to answer that question, but surely a few years. There are subtle, emotional and mental foundations of faith that must be re-laid within the person.

Fourth, a thorough knowledge of Scripture, along with the ability to teach it, is the non-negotiable job description of a New Testament elder (1 Timothy 3:2; 5:17 – 18). Of course, all Scripture is important, especially to teach others and to protect the community from theological error. But two threads in Scripture seem especially important in the formation of Christian character.

(1) There is the common pattern of God placing a person through a ‘wilderness experience.’ God ministered to people through these long and difficult periods where people felt alone and like it was hard to trust God: Abraham and Sarah waiting for three decades for a child; Rebekah at home waiting for Jacob to return; Jacob laboring for his romantic love and then being willing to let go of Joseph and Benjamin, his favorite sons; Leah aching to be loved; Joseph being faithful in Egypt; Moses spending forty years in the wilderness leading sheep, and another forty years leading Israel without entering the promised land; David spending years in the wilderness as a king waiting for enthronement; Elijah and Elisha getting their lives threatened; Isaiah and Jeremiah preaching without positive response and being scorned; Daniel and Esther faithfully obeying God while in exile; Jesus growing up patiently and then being tempted in the wilderness; Saul of Tarsus spending fourteen years in Arabia probably sorting through everything he had ever known. God met with these people in deep ways during these ‘wilderness experiences.’ They seem to be indispensable to shaping one’s ‘identity in Christ.’ Even when we are surrounded by Christian community, we must cultivate an aspect of our journey with Jesus which is profoundly alone: it is a sacred journey.

---

<sup>3</sup> Philip B. Payne writes: “Two of the most prominent complementarians acknowledge this phrase does not clearly exclude women. Douglas Moo acknowledges that this phrase need not exclude “unmarried men or females from the office . . . it would be going too far to argue that the phrase clearly excludes women” from being elders. See Douglas J. Moo, “The Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11–15: A Rejoinder,” *TJ 2 NS* (1981): 198–222, 211. Thomas Schreiner acknowledges, “The requirements for elders in 1 Tim 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9, including the statement that they are to be one-woman men, does not necessarily in and of itself preclude women from serving as elders. . . .” Thomas R. Schreiner’s “Philip Payne on Familiar Ground: A Review of Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul’s Letters*.” *JBMW* (Spring 2010): 33–46, 35.” See <https://www.pbpayne.com/does-one-woman-man-in-1-timothy-32-require-that-all-overseers-be-male/>

<sup>4</sup> See my paper, *The Implications of the Chiasmic Structure of 1 Timothy on the Question of Women in Church Leadership*; [http://nagasawafamily.org/paul\\_1timothy-chiasm-&-women-as-elders.pdf](http://nagasawafamily.org/paul_1timothy-chiasm-&-women-as-elders.pdf)

(2) A fallen leader must surely return to Jesus' transformative teaching in Matthew 5:1 – 7:29 about one's heart, in the face of anger, sexual temptation, enemies, pride, anxiety, uncertainty, greed, etc. The Gospel of Luke spreads out Jesus' ethical teaching into blocks: Luke 6:12 – 49 is about loving enemies; Luke 12:13 – 34 is about generosity and resisting materialism and anxiety; Luke 14:1 – 35 is about table fellowship and community; etc. In fact, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke suggest that the teaching within those pages were meant to accompany the rite of Christian baptism. When the disciples were sent out to baptize and teach all nations, they were to teach 'all that Jesus commanded' them (Matthew 28:18 – 20; Luke 24:44 – 49). Anyone who wishes to be fruitful in Jesus' kingdom movement must be anchored in Jesus' teaching, not because one is rewarded by others for doing so, but simply because it is Jesus himself who commands it.

### **The Christian Leader Who Breaks Character**

In 1 Timothy, Paul gives Timothy some further instructions about how to handle that person's sin while he or she is in leadership.

<sup>5:19</sup> Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. <sup>20</sup> Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning.

While no one is expected to be perfect in other issues which lie outside the minimum requirements already listed in 3:1 – 7 and 5:3 – 10, leaders who continue in sin need to be addressed in some manner so that it is clear to the whole congregation what happened, why it was wrong, and why the person is being removed for leadership (5:19 – 20). The assumption is that those in senior levels of church leadership sign up to be public witnesses to Jesus and publicly transparent about their lives. Their sin also is to be understood publicly. This builds the expectation in the church community that leadership is built on transparency and accountability to Jesus.

It is inappropriate to look anywhere else in Scripture for precedents for how to handle a Christian leader who has committed sin. The reason is because at other times and places in the biblical narrative, God used different forms of leadership, and those leaders had different tasks. See Appendix A for an overview of leadership roles throughout the Old Testament. So it is invalid, for instance, to use King David as an argument. Yes, it is true that King David didn't lose his throne after he sinned with Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Samuel 12). Does that mean that a church elder or pastor should remain in that role even after a sexual sin (or some other serious moral offense)? No. The reason God kept David on his throne is because He had already made a promise to David about a future dynasty, eventually resulting in the final, messianic king (2 Samuel 7). God could not break His own promise to David because of His character as a promise-keeper (Hebrews 6:13 – 18) and also because the salvation of the world through Jesus the Messiah depended on it! So He kept David on the throne. However, no elder or pastor has a promise directly from God about being in that formal ministry role. And certainly no one can stay in that role when he or she fails the New Testament requirements for *eldership*.

In fact, if there *is* an appropriate model in the Old Testament for a fallen leader who is removed from office because of sin, it would be David's predecessor, Saul of Benjamin, starting from 1 Samuel 8. God placed Saul in the position of king despite the fact that Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin, and the fact that the kingship was to rest within the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:8 – 12). In other words, God always meant for Saul to be king for only a season, and not to establish a dynasty built on his sons. Because of the shallowness of his character, Saul grew addicted to his own authority and role. He sought to manage appearances despite his lack of faith in God and sinful disobedience. And when God anointed his replacement, the young man David, to be the next king of a united Israel, Saul refused to resign. It drove him mad. He refused to see how stepping down from the throne not only would be good for his own faith and character, but also good for Israel because they needed a new faith-filled leader. He also refused to read the pattern of the Old Testament before him. He did not see that the scepter rightfully belonged to the tribe of Judah, according to Jacob's prophecy (Genesis 49:8 – 12). He did not see how stepping aside for young David fit a biblical pattern from Genesis where God gave a younger sibling leadership and removed it from an older one: Seth replaced Cain as the 'firstborn' (covenant-bearing heir and leader of the family) of Adam and Eve (Genesis 4:25 – 26); Isaac replaced Ishmael as the 'firstborn' of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 21 – 22); Jacob replaced Esau as the 'firstborn' of Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 25 – 35); Judah replaced his older brothers Reuben, Simeon, and Levi as the 'firstborn' of Jacob and Leah (Genesis 37 – 50). That's because Reuben, Simeon, and Levi had all failed morally.

When Israel became a nation and not just a family, the great leaders *Moses, Aaron, and Miriam* were all replaced for their failures as well. God replaced Moses with Joshua, and made the Israelites wait in the wilderness until Moses climbed up Mount Nebo to die there while looking out over the promised land (Deuteronomy 34). With the exception of Joshua and Caleb, God replaced the entire first generation of Israelites who came out of Egypt, because they sinned and failed to trust God to lead them against the Canaanites (Numbers 13 – 15). God was perfectly content with waiting until every single adult Israelite – including Moses, Aaron, and Miriam – died off in the desert before advancing His plan to bring Israel into the promised land. *That should also inform any church leadership question when leaders who have failed morally do not step aside voluntarily.*

Only the final heir of David, Jesus of Nazareth, could be trusted to be humanity's true and eternal king. And with Jesus, the Davidic monarchy was fulfilled, and also removed from any other human descendants of David to claim. This is why King David and his heirs simply cannot serve as models for restoring fallen leaders. Once again, King Saul disqualified himself and was dethroned. Because no single elder or pastor has a covenant promise with God to remain in office, Saul, not David, is the more appropriate model. *Jesus is the founder of his church, and its leader. He cannot be replaced, which means everyone else can be.*

What about the New Testament? Simon Peter, and indeed all the disciples, failed Jesus at his trial and crucifixion. And Jesus restored them – minus Judas Iscariot – fairly quickly into apostleship. Can we take that as a precedent to quickly restore a morally fallen elder or pastor? Let's stop to think about that.

For one thing, only Judas Iscariot is described by the New Testament as 'betraying' Jesus (e.g. Matthew 26:21 – 24; John 12:4; 13:21). The other disciples are not said to 'betray' Jesus. Simon Peter denied Jesus verbally (Matthew 26:69 – 75), but at least he was trying to stay near to his master while Jesus was being interrogated. So Simon Peter and the others wound up being 'witnesses' to Jesus in the end. That role of 'witness' is one requirement to be an apostle, according to Paul, when he says, 'Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?' (1 Corinthians 9:1).

For another thing, the apostles were confused about Jesus' job description, but not his identity as messiah, because of the specific period of time they inhabited, prior to Jesus' resurrection. They thought Jesus would be a military revolutionary, which is perhaps why Judas Iscariot sought to force Jesus into a military revolt and also profit by it (Matthew 26:21 – 25; 27:1 – 10), and why Simon Peter reached for a sword thinking he needed to defend Jesus (Matthew 26:51; John 18:10). So although they did not truly understand the nature of Jesus' kingship, they were not disloyal to Jesus according to their own, limited understanding of him. In John's Gospel, Jesus called the eleven remaining disciples 'clean' (John 13:10 – 11) and seems to have regarded his ministry with them up until that point to be a success (John 17:6 – 19).

Apostles could have disqualified themselves through moral failure. As John MacArthur notes above, *even the apostle Paul believed he could have been disqualified from ministry.* He says, 'I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified' (1 Corinthians 9:27). Because of Paul's overwhelming emphasis on 'the body' in 1 Corinthians,<sup>5</sup> commentators believe that when Paul is speaking of disciplining *his body* so as to not be disqualified from future ministry, he is speaking of sexual sin, which he had discussed in 1 Corinthians 5 – 7. His 'vice list' contains sexual sins which he rhetorically assumes the Corinthians practice no longer (6:9 – 11). And he describes sexual sin as a sin against one's own body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit (6:18 – 20). Since Paul rests his apostleship and teaching authority on the Holy Spirit informing his mind and speaking through him (7:40), presumably damaging that relationship with the Spirit would have called into question his authority as an apostle. So it seems reasonable to say that even if Paul is speaking of *more* than sexual sin in 9:27, he is not speaking of *less*.

---

<sup>5</sup> Paul teaches on 'the body' throughout each major section of 1 Corinthians. The first section is about the corporate 'body of Christ' (1:10 – 4:16); the second is about sexual ethics for the individual 'body' of the believer in the context of the corporate 'body of Christ' (4:17 – 7:40); the third is about relational ethics for the individual 'body' of the believer in the context of the corporate 'body of Christ' as a community of Jew and Gentile (8:1 – 11:1); the fourth is about the corporate 'body of Christ' in the worship setting (11:2 – 14:40); and the fifth is about Jesus' resurrected body and the future resurrection bodies that people will be given (15:1 – 58).

Other examples of disqualification exist, too. Ananias and Sapphira lied about their generosity. For that, God did not hesitate to take their lives, not just whatever leadership role they had (Acts 5:1 – 11). He apparently did this because their integrity was essential to the spread of the gospel message. They had ‘filled their hearts’ with something evil (Luke 6:45; Acts 5:3). If Ananias and Sapphira were part of the group of seventy disciples (Luke 10:1), the hundred and twenty disciples (Acts 1:15), or some extended group of disciples who had also seen Jesus, then they were probably church leaders in a broad sense. Moreover, God apparently took the lives of disobedient Christians later on. Paul says to the Corinthians, ‘For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep’ (1 Corinthians 11:29 – 30).

The early church provides us with an example of Christians deposing one of their own leaders. In Polycarp of Smyrna’s *Epistle to the Philippians*, dated around the time of Ignatius’ martyrdom before 120 AD, we have a fascinating example of a congregation deposing an elder. In chapter 11 of that letter, written sometime in the first half of the second century, we have the case of the Philippian church community having deposed one of their own elders, Valens, because he had demonstrated *covetousness*. Polycarp, a church leader in nearby Smyrna, affirms the Philippian Christians:

‘I am greatly grieved for Valens, who was once a presbyter among you, because he so little understands the place that was given him [in the Church]. I exhort you, therefore, that ye abstain from covetousness, and that ye be chaste and truthful. ‘Abstain from every form of evil.’ [1 Thessalonians 5:22] For if a man cannot govern himself in such matters, how shall he enjoin them on others? If a man does not keep himself from covetousness, he shall be defiled by idolatry, and shall be judged as one of the heathen. But who of us are ignorant of the judgment of the Lord? ‘Do we not know that the saints shall judge the world?’ [1 Corinthians 6:2] as Paul teaches. But I have neither seen nor heard of any such thing among you, in the midst of whom the blessed Paul laboured, and who are commended in the beginning of his Epistle. For he boasts of you in all those Churches which alone then knew the Lord; but we [of Smyrna] had not yet known Him. I am deeply grieved, therefore, brethren, for him (Valens) and his wife; to whom may the Lord grant true repentance! And be ye then moderate in regard to this matter, and ‘do not count such as enemies,’ [2 Thessalonians 3:15] but call them back as suffering and straying members, that ye may save your whole body. For by so acting ye shall edify yourselves.’<sup>6</sup>

I assume Valens committed an observable infraction: favoritism towards rich people, embezzlement, theft, perhaps even ostentatious living. Some commentators believe that Valens had committed some kind of sexual sin, but others maintain materialism, which I regard as more likely because his wife is mentioned as a *collaborator*, not a victim.

This decision must not have been easy. I’m a person of Japanese descent, and I know that in traditional, non-Western cultures, it’s hard to publicly challenge a biological family member over a small issue! It’s almost impossible to imagine doing that over a formal leadership position and full participation in the community. But God calls us to place loyalty to His family over pure loyalty to one’s own immediate family (e.g. Matthew 12:49 – 50; Luke 8:19 – 21).

Polycarp, who was bishop of Smyrna, and perhaps the Christian leader with the highest stature near the Philippians, wrote to them to commend them for deposing Valens, as well as his wife, from being an elder in the Philippian church. Polycarp hoped that Valens and his wife would return as ‘members.’ This is a great example of how the early Christians put biblical teaching into practice. Jesus is the founder of his church and its leader. He is the only indispensable one. Everyone else can and should be removed from positions of church leadership if they do not meet his character requirements.

Regarding selecting leaders for the first time in 1 Timothy 5:22 – 25, pastor Stephen Cole remarks:

‘The manner in which Timothy can avoid appointing unqualified elders is to take his time (5:22) and observe the lives of these men carefully. Careful observation will reveal two classes of men: (1) Those unfit for office (5:24). There are two categories here: Those obviously unfit—their sins march on ahead of them for everyone to see; those not so obviously unfit—their sins follow after them, but eventually come to light.

---

<sup>6</sup> Polycarp of Smyrna, *Epistle to the Philippians* 11

At first glance, they may seem qualified, but time will show their track record, that they are not godly men. (2) Those fit for office (5:25). Again, there are the same two categories: Those obviously fit for office—their good deeds are evident; those fit for office, but not so obviously. The last half of the sentence is a bit confusing, but I take it to be parallel to verse 24, so the sense is, “Those good deeds of other men are not so evident at first, but they can’t be hidden in the long run.” So Paul is saying that people aren’t always what they appear to be on the surface. Men should not be selected for leadership in the church on a superficial or hasty basis. They don’t always turn out to be what they seem to be at first. Carefully observe their way of life, especially in their home (3:2, 4, 5). Also, how is their public reputation (3:7)? Don’t put a man into church leadership unless he has a proven record of godly character and good deeds.’<sup>7</sup>

Cole’s everyday language is helpful in highlighting the importance of time. Time shows a candidate’s ‘track record’ or ‘proven record of godly character and good deeds.’ Selection for leadership is not to be ‘hasty.’ And this is for a candidate being considered for church eldership for the first time.

### **Is Restoration to Leadership Possible?**

So let’s frame the question at hand against the New Testament picture: *Christians used to die for taking communion in an unworthy way. Apostles thought they could be disqualified from ministry. Given that, how serious is it for elders to fail the character requirements given to them? Is restoration to that kind of leadership role possible?*

How churches and denominations handle the situation when an elder or paid pastor sins gives us a sense of the seriousness of Christian leadership. John MacArthur, pastor at Grace Community Church since 1969, appears to believe that, for sexual sin, for example, there is no possibility of return to a position of church leadership, at least on a senior level:

‘There are some sins that irreparably shatter a man’s reputation and disqualify him from a ministry of leadership forever. Even Paul, man of God that he was, said he feared such a possibility. In 1 Corinthians 9:27 he says, “I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.”

‘When referring to his body, Paul obviously had sexual immorality in view. In 1 Corinthians 6:18 he describes it as a sin against one’s own body—sexual sin is in its own category. Certainly it disqualifies a man from church leadership since he permanently forfeits a blameless reputation as a one-woman man (Proverbs 6:33; 1 Timothy 3:2)...

‘What about forgiveness? Shouldn’t we be eager to restore our fallen brethren? To fellowship, yes. But not to leadership. It is not an act of love to return a disqualified man to public ministry; it is an act of disobedience.’<sup>8</sup>

Thabiti Anyabwile, church planter and pastor, in his specific exploration of the black church, *Reviving the Black Church: A Call to Reclaim a Sacred Institution*, writes:

‘In such cases, action needs to be taken to remove leaders to disqualify themselves. Leading the church is not a right. Giftedness does not indicate fitness. Even swelling crowds is no indication that God approves of a man and his ministry. Some of the world’s most notorious cult leaders have been surrounded by throngs of fawning followers.’<sup>9</sup>

R. Kent Hughes and John H. Armstrong, in an article in *Christianity Today* titled ‘Should Adulterous Pastors Be Restored? The Bible’s Teaching About Returning Fallen Ministers to the Pulpit,’ from September 4, 2015, write:

---

<sup>7</sup> Steven J. Cole, ‘Lesson 18: Church Leadership: Keeping It Godly (1 Timothy 5:19 - 25),’ *Bible.org*, <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-18-church-leadership-keeping-it-godly-1-timothy-519-25>.

<sup>8</sup> John MacArthur, ‘Should Fallen Pastors Be Restored,’ *Grace to You*, 1991; <https://www.gty.org/library/articles/a256/should-fallen-pastors-be-restored>

<sup>9</sup> Thabiti Anyabwile, *Reviving the Black Church: A Call to Reclaim a Sacred Institution* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), p.146 – 147; see all of chapter 8

'The typical pattern goes like this: The pastor is accused and convicted of sexual sin. He confesses his sin, often with profound sorrow. His church or denominational superiors prescribe a few months, or often one year, in which time he is encouraged to obtain professional counsel. Then he is restored to his former office, sometimes in another location. He is commonly regarded as a "wounded healer," one who now knows what it means to fall, to experience the grace of God profoundly.

'While each situation must be handled with pastoral wisdom, and some fallen pastors indeed might someday be restored to leadership, we believe this increasingly common scenario is both biblically incorrect and profoundly harmful to the well-being of the fallen pastor, his marriage, and the church of Jesus Christ.'<sup>10</sup>

The editors of *Christianity Today* prefaced the article with this statement:

'Genuine forgiveness does not necessarily imply restoration to leadership," former *CT* editor Kenneth Kantzer once wrote after the moral failure of several prominent evangelical leaders. Yet the impulse to link forgiveness with restoration to ministry remains strong. Here two pastor-theologians argue for the importance of keeping separate the restoration to the body of Christ and restoration to pastoral leadership.'<sup>11</sup>

Steven J. Cole, pastor of Flagstaff Christian Fellowship since May of 1992, comments on the leadership requirements of 1 Timothy:

'Depending on the seriousness of the sin, the man may need to step down from his office until he rebuilds a godly reputation. While moral failure need not disqualify a man from public ministry for the rest of his life, he can't possibly restore the necessary qualifications of being above reproach, a one-woman man, and having a good reputation with outsiders in a few months (1 Tim. 3:2 – 7).'<sup>12</sup>

What does 'reputation' mean here? Why are restoration and reputation considered so seriously in both Scripture and in real life? One's 'reputation' is public knowledge about proven character and deeper issues as recognized by other people.

Is it possible for fallen pastors and elders to be reconsidered for pastorship and eldership a second time? I know from personal acquaintance, and anecdotally, that restoration of men and women into ministry roles has happened, in some cases to great fruitfulness. But unfortunately, other cases led to a second heartache. Thabiti Anyabwile reasons:

'Church leaders and congregations must develop a framework for deciding which offenses permanently disqualify a person from church office. Some infractions require lifelong suspension from church leadership. Whenever a leader's sin results in never being able to again satisfy the requirements of 1 Timothy 3:1 – 13, that leader should be restored to Christ but not to the offices of the church.'<sup>13</sup>

I would reason that reconsideration to eldership or a senior-level pastorate or a paid ministry position of some sort is possible in theory. However, I think it is most responsible to give a second chance to someone in a slow and incremental way, long before the church reconsiders that person again for an elder-level or pastor-level role. The

---

<sup>10</sup> R. Kent Hughes and John H. Armstrong, 'Should Adulterous Pastors Be Restored? The Bible's Teaching About Returning Fallen Ministers to the Pulpit,' *Christianity Today*, September 4, 2015;

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1995/april-3/should-adulterous-pastors-be-restored.html>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Steven J. Cole, 'Lesson 18: Church Leadership: Keeping It Godly (1 Timothy 5:19 - 25),' *Bible.org*, <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-18-church-leadership-keeping-it-godly-1-timothy-519-25>. Steven Cole has been the pastor of Flagstaff Christian Fellowship since May, 1992. From 1977 – 1992 he pastored Lake Gregory Community Church in Crestline, California. He graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary (Th.M., 1976 in Bible exposition)

<sup>13</sup> Thabiti Anyabwile, *Reviving the Black Church: A Call to Reclaim a Sacred Institution* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), p.151

person can serve as a layperson in a volunteer capacity. Then, provided things go well, he or she might be considered in some paid capacity, because part of the long process of rebuilding trust is acknowledging that other members of the church will need to feel confident about the structure of accountability and evaluation so that they will be confident to give financially and support this person to minister in their midst.

A collaboration of six authors, who teach on the sin and restoration of Christian leaders, make this helpful statement:

‘It is not enough just to repair buildings and roads; they must be made stronger than they were before the quake. Engineers call this “retrofitting” – bringing physical structures to a place of greater strength and stability after they’ve been built. Retrofitting bridges, buildings and freeways is necessary due to the possibility of future natural disasters. A building weakened by one earthquake could easily crumble with the next quake unless improvements are made. The goal is to be prepared so that future shocks will not result in total destruction.

This concept presents a visual image of what happens inside a person whose choices cause the devastation of a major life earthquake. It also pictures the extensive efforts needed to rebuild that life. Hebrews 12:12 – 13 tells us, “Strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. Make level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.” This passage teaches the principle of spiritual reconstructions, which leads to healing.’<sup>14</sup>

Larry Ward, pastor of Abundant Life Church in Cambridge, MA since 1994, once commented to me in conversation, ‘Rest is not enough. You can break your leg, and get some rest, but after that, you’d still be trying to get around on a broken leg.’ A fallen Christian leader must engage in a deep process of unearthing idolatry and fixing one’s resistance to Jesus. He or she must commit to renewed practices of transparency along with internal and external boundaries. He or she will need to reestablish trust, and trust is based on proven character, character demonstrated over the course of time.

---

<sup>14</sup> Earl & Sandy Wilson, Paul & Virginia Friesen, Larry & Nancy Paulson, *Restoring the Fallen: A Team Approach to Caring, Confronting & Reconciling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p.41 – 42. See also Gordon MacDonald, *Rebuilding Your Broken World* (Thomas Nelson, 2004) and Jan Winebrenner and Debra Frazier, *When a Leader Falls, What Happens to Everyone Else?* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1993)

## Appendix A: Leadership Roles in the Old Testament

This is a good time to establish what good Bible study practices are. Good Bible study practices do not draw on one time historical incidents to make conclusions. After all, the Bible tells the story of how people sin against God. So just because an act is *described* in Scripture doesn't mean it is *prescribed* by Scripture. For example, we must understand how David's sin and retention of his kingship are evaluated by the *Book of Samuel* itself, because the biblical narrator actually has an opinion about it. We must also understand the placement of, say, King David, in the canon of Scripture – that is, in the development of the story of the Bible which leads up to Jesus. So a healthy method of Bible study is literary (by the whole book) and canonical (by the whole Bible).

In fact, if there *is* an appropriate model in the Old Testament for a fallen leader who is removed from office because of sin, it would be David's predecessor, Saul of Benjamin, starting from 1 Samuel 8. God placed Saul in the position of king despite the fact that Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin, and the fact that the kingship was to rest within the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:8 – 12). In other words, God always meant for Saul to be king for only a season, and not to establish a dynasty built on his sons. Because of the shallowness of his character, Saul grew addicted to his own authority and role. He sought to manage appearances despite his lack of faith in God and sinful disobedience. And when God anointed his replacement, the young man David, to be the next king of a united Israel, Saul refused to resign. It drove him mad. He refused to see how stepping down from the throne not only would be good for his own faith and character, but also good for Israel because they needed a new faith-filled leader. He also refused to read the pattern of the Old Testament before him. He did not see that the scepter rightfully belonged to the tribe of Judah, according to Jacob's prophecy (Genesis 49:8 – 12). He did not see how stepping aside for young David fit a biblical pattern from Genesis where God gave a younger sibling leadership and removed it from an older one: Seth replaced Cain as the 'firstborn' (covenant-bearing heir and leader of the family) of Adam and Eve (Genesis 4:25 – 26); Isaac replaced Ishmael as the 'firstborn' of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 21 – 22); Jacob replaced Esau as the 'firstborn' of Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 25 – 35); Judah replaced his older brothers Reuben, Simeon, and Levi as the 'firstborn' of Jacob and Leah (Genesis 37 – 50).

Which gives this survey of leadership in the Old Testament its truest starting point: the *Book of Genesis*, when leadership was within the family. When Israel was a family, *moral and spiritual qualifications were paramount in leadership. And moral and spiritual disqualifications did occur.* In the cultural context of the ancient world, the family rights of the firstborn son were iron-clad. Nevertheless, God bypassed that right. God followed a pattern where the older served the younger, and the younger became the spiritual and moral leader of the family. It is especially pertinent to see that God bypassed Reuben, Simeon, and Levi because they disqualified themselves morally: Reuben sinned sexually against family members (Genesis 35:22; 49:3 – 4); Simeon and Levi murdered some Canaanites in cold blood (Genesis 34:25 – 31; 49:5 – 7). Judah mistreated his daughter-in-law Tamar by trying to exclude her and control the inheritance towards his favored son (Genesis 38). But Tamar possessed a surprising commitment by faith to be part of the chosen family and the blessing of God. She ironically preserved Judah's role in the family as the father who bestows the inheritance. Judah seems to have learned from this. He came to a place of maturity later in life where he was ready to give his life – and his role in the family – for his half-brother Benjamin. Judah did not naturally feel affection for Benjamin since he was a son of Rachel and not Leah, and Judah would have been happy to exclude him from the family blessing, ordinarily (Genesis 44:18 – 34). Yet because of his moral and spiritual leadership, Judah came to bear the role of 'firstborn' after all, by the time his father Jacob gave his dying blessing (Genesis 49).

When Israel became a nation and not just a family, the great leaders *Moses, Aaron, and Miriam were all replaced for their failures as well.* Yes, it is true that Aaron and Miriam sinned by grumbling against Moses yet were restored in their respective roles (Numbers 12:1 – 16). They lasted in those roles until they died (Numbers 20); and the three of them were all replaced by the hereditary Levitical priesthood. But the stories of Aaron and Miriam's restoration do not contain a general principle about fallen leaders and their restoration (after all, Miriam was struck with leprosy for seven days – in what sense is that generalizable?). Instead, the story in Numbers 12 is about why Moses' prayerful mediation was effective: Moses was the covenant mediator between God and Israel. As that mediator, he even participated in the 'divine counsel' as God made decisions. That is how the *Torah* (the biblical narrative from Genesis to Deuteronomy) portrays Moses.

Despite Moses' unique role, *God did replace Moses for his failure in leadership.* Moses was the sole representative of all Israel who ascended up Mount Sinai to make the Sinai covenant with God (Exodus 19; 32 – 34). Everyone

else in Israel – including Aaron and Miriam – benefited from the covenant by virtue of their respect for Moses, and Moses' prayers for them. Yet God stopped Moses from leading Israel into the promised land. Moses sinned against God by misrepresenting Him: By striking the rock rather than simply speaking to it in order to call forth water, Moses seems to have portrayed God as angry when He was not (Numbers 20). Therefore, God replaced Moses with Joshua, and made the Israelites wait in the wilderness until Moses climbed up Mount Nebo to die there while looking out over the promised land (Deuteronomy 34). With the exception of Joshua and Caleb, God replaced the entire first generation of Israelites who came out of Egypt, because they sinned and failed to trust God to lead them against the Canaanites (Numbers 13 – 15). God was perfectly content with waiting until every single adult Israelite – including Moses, Aaron, and Miriam – died off in the desert before advancing His plan to bring Israel into the promised land. *That should also inform any church leadership question when leaders who have failed morally do not step aside voluntarily.*

During the period of the *Book of Judges*, God was quite ready to replace any 'judge' simply by not filling his or her shoes. The judges were not institutionalized. They were sporadic, ad-hoc men and women whom God raised up to serve for a time. In that day and age, this was the greatest check of all against the 'leader who would not step down': God did not establish a dynastic kingship from that judge's sons and grandsons. Furthermore, based on the stories of Abimelech in Judges 9 and of Samson in Judges 13 – 16, *God could certainly regard a judge as disqualified based on that judge's moral and spiritual decisions.* Abimelech was mortally injured by a woman who threw a stone on his head in Judges 9:53, which is seen by the narrative as a consequence of his own moral and spiritual failures. Samson lost his leadership and spiritual strength when he finally revealed his secret to Delilah in Judges 16:15 – 22; God answered Samson's prayer for strength only so that Samson could give his own life while he brought down the hall of the Philistine lords from the inside. *But God did not restore him as a leader in the community of His people.*

Then, we come to the hereditary kingship of the books of *Samuel* and *Kings*, where the Davidic king could not simply be deposed. The previous biblical material is important here. Human kingship was already regarded by the *Book of Judges* as a pagan, Canaanite institution (Judges 8:22ff.), which would have to be significantly modified if it was to be established in Israel. The *Book of Samuel*, through the lips of the prophet Samuel, repeats that warning about an institutional kingship, portraying Israel's request for a king as disobedience on their part and a concession from God (1 Samuel 8:10 – 22). Not only that, but the profound weaknesses of a hereditary dynasty as a form of leadership were already foreshadowed by the *Book of Samuel*, both by Eli the priest and his corrupt sons in 1 Samuel 2:12 – 25, and even Samuel the prophet and his corrupt sons in 1 Samuel 8:1 – 3. David and his heirs proved to be no better. Priest, prophet, and king: In no office could a father guarantee that his son would be faithful and moral. This is why proper Bible study methods are important. The biblical narrator of the *Book of Samuel* has an opinion about David's kingship.

The *Book of Samuel* demonstrates what happened when God committed Himself to David as king. God promised David a lasting dynasty of heirs in the famous Davidic covenant (2 Samuel 7). However, once he was king, David committed adultery with, and possibly raped, his neighbor Bathsheba. Bathsheba's inner thoughts are not narrated in 2 Samuel 12, which leaves us with the distinct impression that David's act was rape. David, trying to cover up any pregnancy, manipulated battle orders surrounding Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, and eventually killed him by giving orders to let him die on the battlefield. King David, who had already been presented as a 'new Adam,' a shepherd ruling over the beasts, like Adam was originally intended to be (1 Samuel 17:34 – 37), therefore duplicated the sin of Adam and Eve in seizing a 'forbidden fruit,' as well as the sin of Cain in killing his brother. In response, God cursed David's dynasty. He said that the sword of war and bloodshed will never depart from it: 'Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife' (2 Samuel 12:10). Only Jesus as the messianic king from David's line could resolve that curse. As a result of his own sin, David was morally compromised and apparently paralyzed when his son Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar (2 Samuel 13). David's moral indecision and abdication in the face of Tamar's rape arguably came about because of his own adultery with (and rape of?) Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah. *Morally and spiritually compromised people often fail as leaders to take appropriate actions in regards to others.* The vengeful Absalom, full brother of Tamar and half-brother of Amnon, usurped his father's authority and claimed the throne for himself, driving David out of the city. After Absalom's rebellion, David eventually came back to the city and to his throne, but only at the heartbreaking cost of a civil war and the loss of his son Absalom. The *Book of Samuel* ends on a pessimistic note, with the haunting question of who – that is, what kind of person – will replace David as king in his old age (2 Samuel 24).

With David's heirs, things went from bad to worse, which is the point of the narrative of the *Book of Kings* in its entirety. Just as David failed to consolidate his 'house' (i.e. family), his son Solomon failed to consolidate his 'house' (i.e. the nation) around the temple in Jerusalem, the 'house of the Lord' (1 Kings 1 – 11). Solomon's exorbitant taxes on the people drove Israel to despair. In just one more generation, Solomon's foolish heir Rehoboam lost the ten northern tribes in a breakaway move (1 Kings 12). The Davidic throne endured in Jerusalem, but it was already a feeble shadow and a mockery of what it was meant to be. In the *Book of Kings*, the narrative ends with God preserving the lineage of David but without any of the power of the throne: The exile into Babylon stripped the house of David of its leadership, military and otherwise (2 Kings 25). This was the cost to Israel, and to God, for installing a permanent, less flexible system of leadership. God was 'stuck' with the house of David!

What are the leadership lessons of the *Book of Samuel* and *Book of Kings*? Surely this: *God's anointing for leadership could indeed be removed by Him, for all intents and purposes.* This is why David prayed for God to not remove the Holy Spirit from him (Psalm 51:11). In the Old Testament, God gave the Holy Spirit to anoint someone for leadership, not in the New Testament sense of union with Christ because the Spirit had not been given in that sense yet (cf. John 7:38 – 39). David had seen or sensed the Spirit depart from Saul once Saul was no longer the legitimate king from God's perspective (1 Samuel 16:14). *Although God's commitment to the institution of the hereditary Davidic throne kept David's lineage alive, the reality provided by the biblical narrator is that compromised or disobedient kings became ineffectual and problematic. They really needed to be replaced by another Davidic heir or simply die.* That is partly why the biblical narrators tell the story the way they do – of a fallen and troubled family which, over generations, supplied faulty men to a throne cursed with war.

Only the final heir of David, Jesus of Nazareth, could be trusted to be humanity's true and eternal king. And with Jesus, the Davidic monarchy was fulfilled, and also removed from any other human descendants of David to claim. This is why King David and his heirs simply cannot serve as models for restoring fallen leaders. Once again, King Saul disqualified himself and was dethroned. Because no single elder or pastor has a covenant promise with God to remain in office, Saul, not David, is the more appropriate model. *Jesus is the founder of his church, and its leader. He cannot be replaced, which means everyone else can be.*