

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Ministerial Qualifications: Part 5

Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. (1 Timothy 3:6)

A "novice" is someone new and inexperienced in an activity. Such a person lacks the experience and stability to deal with difficulties wisely and with grace. His lack of knowledge may lead him to oversimplify difficulties and thus conclude that he has all the answers, the first step to the unfounded pride of which Paul here writes. Satan expertly uses human pride to control and to manipulate children of God to corrupt their faith and to neutralize their influence on others for good.

How do you define a "novice" in the faith? Do you simply measure his time in the faith? Certainly his time and experience are a factor, but does time alone remove a man from "novice" status? One man may remain a novice twenty or thirty years after his first profession of faith, while Paul will advise another man, quite young in the faith, but no novice by any definition, "Let no man despise thy youth." (1 Timothy 4:12) A simple anecdote will illustrate my point. According to the story, a building contractor was interviewing experienced carpenters to fill positions in his business. The man currently being interviewed gave evidence that he'd been in the building trade for some time. He knew all the terms well enough. He verified his job application, that he'd been a carpenter for some fifteen years. The contractor hired the man. After a few weeks on the job, the contractor fired the man. When the man asked why he was being fired, the contractor replied, "Your job application indicated that you had fifteen years of experience as a carpenter. In your interview, you affirmed that point. However, as I have observed your actual work on the job, I must conclude that you have had one year of experience, repeated fifteen times." Despite working "on the job" for fifteen years, this man had never advanced beyond one year of skill in his trade. It is altogether possible for a man aspiring to ministry to cite years of experience in the faith, but yet to demonstrate a sad void of wisdom and experience in his understanding of Scripture and in his dealings with hungry, hurting sheep.

Satan loves to keep God's children off balance. In one instance, he will whisper in your ear that you are so wise, insightful, and experienced that you'd waste your time with such a paltry little bunch of pathetic sheep. According to Satan's siren song, "God has bigger and better things in mind for you. Seize the moment." If this tactic fails, the next time Satan tries to distract you from serving God—by serving His sheep—he'll accuse you of being the

world's biggest hypocrite. Revelation 12:10 describes Satan as the "accuser of the brethren."

Before a man is qualified for ordination, he needs to have gained experience with both of these diabolical strategies, and to demonstrate stable faith under the heat of both satanic strategies. Specifically, Paul requires that the man demonstrate sufficient maturity, personal and in the faith, that Satan's lie will not deceive him and feed his sinful pride.

Pride goeth before destruction, And an haughty spirit before a fall. Better it is to be of an humble spirit with the lowly, Than to divide the spoil with the proud. (Proverbs 16:18–19)

The proud believer sets himself/herself up for certain downfall. We are never as good, faithful, or flawless as Satan tries to convince us that we are when he applies this particular tactic. A key strategy in assessing a man's personal and spiritual maturity is to observe how he deals with his own faults. Does he quickly become defensive and rationalize his failure so as to blame someone—or something—else, or does he confess his fault with godly and honest transparency? Always finding a way to blame others for one's failures is a large red flag that screams, "Do not ordain this man." In our context, this man aspires to the ministry. James 3:1-2, as well as much of the following context dealing with the tongue, describes the reality of being a preacher. "For in many things we offend all" painfully, but realistically describes the fact of ministry, any man's ministry. James, likely the Lord's half-brother and a godly first generation believer/preacher, uses the personal pronoun "we" to include himself in this description. Any preacher who honestly and objectively examines his own ministry and preaching will uncover painful occasions when he simply chose the wrong words to convey his teaching, words that offended more than edified the sheep he was teaching. How does the man respond when he discovers that his words have so offended "...one of these little ones..."? Does he attempt to blame the sheep? Does he become defensive and hostile toward the sheep? Or does he acknowledge the fact and use the experience to continually work at improving his choice of words and teaching/preaching methods toward better edification?

The preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was upright, even words of truth. The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd. (Ecclesiastes 12:10–11)

Does this man constantly look for better ways to preach, to communicate his message to his hearers? Does he demonstrate constant growth, and especially a willingness to learn and to improve the “tools of his trade,” his choice of words, ideas, and attitudes as he speaks to the church?

What is the “condemnation of the devil” of which Paul here warns? Paul has just concluded a lesson (end of the second chapter) on his prohibition of women preachers. His construct of this prohibition transcends human culture and time, building on an episode that occurred in the Garden of Eden. Thus any attempt to dismiss this passage as not applying to us today, because it was presumably only a local and temporary prohibition, utterly fails. How did Satan entice Eve to eat the forbidden fruit? “...ye shall be as gods....” Since this enticing lie predated any form of idolatry, how do we explain the plural “gods” instead of the singular “God”? I suggest that the Hebrew word, which was plural, is an early affirmation of the Biblical basis for the doctrine of the Trinity. Eve would have no knowledge whatever of idolatry at this time, but she did have knowledge of God. Satan appealed to pride in Eve to form the basis of the first sin. And it worked! Since that time, Satan has regularly employed appeal to human pride, and it still works, so why should we think that Satan would abandon such a successful strategy against the people of God? We can find any number of explanations or reasons that Eve should have recognized the enticement for what it was, but none of them changes what actually occurred. She listened; she believed the lie because it cultivated her to reach out for something that she knew God had prohibited; the core element of the first sin.

We read the Biblical account of Adam and Eve and wonder at the ease with which they seemed to fall prey to the first lie, and to Satan’s first cultivation of sinful pride in them. If we are as wise as we think ourselves to be, we would avoid many of Satan’s enticements to us, equally based on appeal to pride, the mirror image of that first successful snare. Paul’s qualification addresses this point. Any man whom a church seriously considers for ordination must demonstrate sufficient experience, and the resultant humility, to know that he doesn’t have all the answers, that he must often sit at the feet of humble pie, and learn as a child from the Master, and others of the Master’s servants.

A novice in the faith may accomplish something admirable and beneficial, not fully understanding the dynamics of what he has done. This success was so easy, so simple, that he will over-estimate his ability. The seed of pride has been sown in

fertile soil. His novice pride leads him falsely to conclude that he has discovered a long-lost secret to success that all those old, experienced men around him have simply overlooked or neglected. The satanic snare has been set and enticingly baited. He will bite, and, upon his next effort when utter failure snaps him back to reality, he will become disillusioned and abandon or compromise his charge.

Pride and self-will are inherent in our fallen nature. They pose a constant danger. It takes spiritual development and grace to overcome these tendencies and temptations. Only the spiritually mature, seasoned by time and God’s grace, are equipped to face the challenges of spiritual leadership.¹

Inherently pride is self-centered and self-serving. A man who fills either office of leadership in a New Testament church must be “other-centered” and “other-serving.” He cannot promote himself above others or in any way demonstrate other than a servant’s heart if he hopes to edify the Lord’s people and fulfill his office.

The word translated “novice” in this verse was often used of young trees or plants, just recently planted. These new seedlings are vulnerable to disease and to destruction from even small setbacks. The man who qualifies for ordination must be a man whose experience and mature temperament gives him strength in the midst of trial.

In the verse that follows, Paul stipulates that the man must have a good report among people outside the church. The man’s maturity in the faith naturally focuses more on his reputation among people inside the church. Do the people in the church respect him and his judgment and actions under pressure? Does he deal with pressures in a wise manner that earns the respect of the people in the church who know him best? Imagine a situation in which the man in the pastor’s role faces immense pressures. It would be quite natural for him to point the finger of blame at someone or something else. We might even understand an angry response, but we wouldn’t respect it at all. Observe this man under pressure. Does he step up to the situation and shoulder the weight with kind grace? Do you observe his reaction with respect and admiration? This is the requirement that Paul imposes.

A key test in assessing a man whom the church may consider for ordination appears in his attitude toward other more experienced men in the church, or in the greater church culture. Does he respect these men, even when he disagrees with them, or does he manifest a sense that he views himself as better informed and wiser than they? If he can’t

Knute Larson, vol. 9, *I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference, 186 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).

wait for them to get out of the way so he can “Do his thing,” the wise church might be quite cautious in putting him in a position to “do his thing.” Considering the historicity of the Lord’s church, we should wisely consider that we stand, first and foremost on the Lord’s shoulders, but we also stand on the shoulders of men who lived and served faithfully before we came along. Wise and faithful men will serve long after we are gone. Do we respect the shoulders we stand on, or do we view them with contempt and ridicule them for their failures, all the while boasting about the noble things we shall accomplish? This, my friends, is the heart of a novice, a man to be avoided, not ordained to the ministry.

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| Worship service each Sunday | 10:30 A. M. |
| Joseph R. Holder | Pastor |