

Above Reproach

Exodus 18:13-23, 1 Timothy 3:1-16 (ESV)

May 21, 2006

“The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.” “If anyone aspires to the office of overseer,” if anyone aspires to the office of minister of Word and Sacrament, if anyone aspires to be a pastor or an associate pastor, “he desires a noble task.” “Therefore an overseer must be above reproach.” A minister of Word and Sacrament must be above reproach. A pastor or an associate pastor must be above reproach. That is clear. Paul spells out the details in ten specifications. It is a fairly standard list. But apart from going over those individually, the prior question has to do with why a minister must be above reproach? What are the underlying issues? What is the driving force behind this standard? Therein lies the gospel.

One who would be a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ must be above reproach. Why? I submit to you the strange reason that the gospel of Jesus Christ creates enough offense in and of itself that we do not need the ministers of the gospel either adding to that offense, or distracting from it, by creating any offense of their own. Let me say that again: I submit to you the strange reason for ministers being above reproach is that the gospel of Jesus Christ creates enough offense in and of itself that we do not need the ministers of the gospel either adding to that offense, or distracting from it, by creating any offense of their own. How can that be? That can be because the gospel is not all sweetness and light. The gospel is, instead, truth and good news. It is not truth without good news. We could not bear that. But it is not good news without truth, either. That would be of no value or use to us. The gospel is truth and good news, or rather, it is good news and truth. The hard truth does not exist apart from, and is not known apart from, the good news. And yet, when the good news is heard, it carries the truth deeply and inseparably imbedded within it.

The good news is that our sin has been forgiven. The truth revealed by that good news, the negative presupposition of the gospel, is that we are sinners. Some people are so offended by that truth that they cannot, or they refuse to, hear the good news. But that truth is the necessary offense of the gospel. That truth is an offense which we cannot and must not remove. And so we must remove all other offenses, all of which are unnecessary, in order not to block the way to the

encounter with the one offense that alone matters. We must remove all other offenses in order not to allow them to block the way to the gospel. For it is this gospel by which we live. It is this gospel which we must hear. It is this gospel which we must share. It is this gospel which we must not let be hidden by the petty offenses, or the not so petty offenses, of any minister of the gospel.

This is not to say that ministers must be without fault. That is not possible. If that were the requirement, we would have no ministers. All of us know that. And having said that, it is also the case that there are varying degrees of fault, or at least that there are faults of varying degrees of importance. For instance, a good friend of mine told me recently that when he was a senior at Union Seminary he preached his senior sermon in a dark suit, a white shirt, and a tie. He was graded down for wearing a striped tie instead of a solid tie. That may seem ridiculous to us, and the teller of the story was shaking his head, but the point was for the preacher not to offer any distraction to the hearer. The point was for the preacher to present the gospel instead of himself. Still, there are faults of varying degrees of importance, and when Paul writes that ministers are to be “above reproach,” his concern is not so much with little faults as with major ones.

Moreover, it is important in any consideration of offense to remember what John Calvin said on the subject. He wrote that there are two kinds of offense. There is the offense given, and there is the offense taken. Some people are too ready to give offense, and some people are too ready to take offense. When there is an offense noted, it is important to know which kind it is. So, while we are talking about the importance of ministers not giving offense, we must remember to set aside the impossibly high standards set by those people who too easily and too readily take offense at every little thing. Again, if we allowed them to set the standard, we would have no ministers at all.

Still, having set aside frivolous matters, and even allowing for those too easily offended, there is still a large area of potential ministerial offense to be avoided. “Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.” These are huge. These have to do with faithfulness, judgment, restraint, reputation, hospitality, helpfulness, sobriety, gentleness, agreeableness, and a lack of covetousness. Problems in these areas do distract from the preaching of the gospel and therefore detract from the hearers’ ability to receive the gospel. Problems in these areas are to be avoided not so much for the sake of the minister as for the sake of the proclamation of the gospel and therefore for the sake of the life of the church. The minister “must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.”

What do these areas of potential ministerial offense have to do with all the rest of the members of the church? I am a minister. We are preparing to call an associate pastor. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will be making a decision this summer about ordination standards for ministers, elders, and deacons. But what do these have to do with the rest of the members of the church? “If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach.” The standards are in place for the sake of a noble task. The noble task is the proclamation of the gospel. And this is of concern to you, to me, to all of us, to the church as a whole. It is imperative that these standards be maintained for the sake of the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, for the glory of God, for the edification of the church, and for the salvation of humanity.

What is this gospel? God the Father, eternally the Father of the Son, sent God the Son, eternally the Son of the Father, to live among us as one of us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who was and is the Christ. This, by the way, is the offense of the Christ, not that he was a good man, but that he was God himself among us. There may be many proximately good men. But there is only one man who is the only begotten Son of God. There is only one man who is God himself among us. To deal with him is to deal with God. To reject this man is to reject God himself. But to receive this man is to receive God himself. Having been encountered by Jesus, we necessarily make one choice or the other. Therein lies the offense of Christ. Fully divine and fully human, at the same time, Jesus taught, he healed, he fed, he gathered disciples, and most of all he suffered though he was without sin, he gave his life on the cross on our account, and he died a death he did not deserve. Because he remained faithful to the very end, because his love was not broken, because he did not hate those who hated him, and because he prayed for those who persecuted him, God his Father accepted this perfect offering of himself, vindicated his offering and sacrifice, and raised him from the dead to life again. As Paul wrote, perhaps quoting an early creed, “He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.”

There are two major implications of all of this for us. The first has to do with the forgiveness of sin. The second has to do with the promise of eternal life. The first has to do with the perfect offering of himself which Jesus made on our behalf on the cross. Sin has unleashed a gonewrongness in the world. One time, on the cross, that wrong was all set right. The one person who had not sinned against God made a perfect offering of himself on behalf of all the rest of us. Sin could not defeat him. Sin could not break him. Sin could not make him cease to believe, cease to love, cease to obey, or cease to be himself. Instead, Jesus offered a sinlessness, a

faith, a love, and an obedience that balanced out and undid the gonewrongness of the world. He has paid the price to set things right. He has won the forgiveness of our sin. And, through the inner work of the Holy Spirit, we appropriate this only by trusting in him for what he has done for us, which trust involves our deepening realization of how evil, sinful, lost, and helpless we are apart from him. Therein lies the offense of the gospel. There is nothing we can do for ourselves. Without him we have nothing. But with him we have everything. Thanks be to God!

The second implication of the gospel has to do with the promise of eternal life. God the Father did not raise God the Son to a new and eternal life simply for the sake of the Son. God raised Jesus Christ to a new and eternal life as the promise of our own eternal life. This earthly life here and now, as wonderful a gift as it is, is not all there is to life. There is another and even greater life beyond here, by the mercy and power of God. But this second implication of the gospel, this promise of eternal life, is not where the problem of offense lies. Most people are eager to hear the promise of eternal life. Most people are not offended by the good news of a better world beyond this one. So this is not the offense from which we must be careful not to turn people away. That offense has to do with the first implication of the gospel, the forgiveness of sin, and therefore with the sin that needs to be forgiven.

What does it mean that we are sinful? We can learn this only in the light of forgiveness. That we are sinful means not that we are finite, limited, less intelligent than we could be, or even immoral, though all of these are true. That we are sinful means that we have rejected precisely the God who forgives us, that we have despised the God who loves us, that we have disdained the God who made us, that we have averted our attention from God, and that we have pretended that we ourselves are the center of our lives. And once we have done that, there is nothing we can do ourselves to undo it. Once we have become self-centered, no effort of the self can make us not self-centered. The self has become estranged from God. The self has become weak and helpless. And that is what we hate to admit. Instead, we want to think that we are good when we are evil. We want to think that we are strong when we are weak. We want to think that we are generous when we are stingy. We want to think that we are moral when we are obscene. We want to think that we are clean when we are filthy. We want to think that we are self-sufficient when we are dying. The power of self-deception is immense. No wonder the gospel is offensive. It offers us healing, and in so doing it exposes our disease. It clothes us in righteousness, and in so doing it reveals our nakedness. It fills us with riches, and in so doing it uncovers our poverty.

And yet, is not the prize worth the shame? Is not the goal worth the disgrace? Is not the forgiveness of sin the medicine we need, and are not the hope and the joy

of it sufficient for us to admit and so leave behind the sin which clings so closely? Lord, help us! If people have to be offended, let them be offended by the gospel, and let them have the privilege of that struggle with the grace of God Almighty made known and present in Jesus Christ. Let us not as ministers, officers, or members of the church do anything in our personal lives or in our life together as the church to offend others before they can even hear the gospel, or to scare them away from the opportunity of hearing the good news of Jesus Christ. That is the point of what Paul wrote to Timothy and so to all of us: “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.”

*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God,
be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

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