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# “Let Not Many of You Become Teachers.” Applying James 3:1 to the Local Church

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**ABSTRACT.** How does James’ word of discouragement to teachers in James 3:1 fit in with a canonical and synthetic approach that can be applied to the local church today? This article seeks to present a robust reading of James 3:1 that wrestles with the influential Pauline passages on spiritual gifts. The focus of this study is to present practical implications and results of reading James 3:1 as being in tension with Paul’s teaching on spiritual gifts. Specific attention is given to the need to think critically about how James 3:1 impacts eldership, the role of faith, small groups and teaching authority. The study concludes that James 3:1 can provide gravity to the role of teachers when many view teaching in the church with flippancy.

**KEY WORDS:** teachers, elders, spiritual gifts, church growth, leadership

## **Introduction**

Free of long qualifications, footnotes or parenthetical apologies, the short book of James has the potential to hit the implied reader right between the eyes. The contemporary context of evangelicalism makes the clear imperative of James 3:1 “let not many of you become teachers,” difficult to implement. We live in a culture dominated by the notion an individual should pursue any dream or profession. In the church this often translates into a universal encouragement to pursue leading small groups or teaching Sunday school if they so desire. It is hard to imagine anyone saying, “Yes, you may indeed have a spiritual gift of teaching... but maybe you shouldn’t use that gift in the church right now.” But James 3:1 does admit at least the possibility of

such conclusions, even if they are very uncomfortable. What James 3:1 does demand, in addition to the need to obey it, is to not only determine its singular meaning but to reflect upon and think critically about its various applications.

The reflections offered here are intentionally systematic with a focus on ecclesiology that interacts with biblical studies. They are therefore indeed to be *synthetic* across diverse writers, *canonical* across diverse books and yet *practical*. The need for an ecclesiastical and systematic reflection on James 3:1 is based on several facts. First, many commentaries are not written for the church. Many are written for the academy and do not address practical problems and application. Second, the division between dogmatics and biblical studies has made systematic interpretations of biblical texts foreign. Third, in a matter of speaking, the topic of ecclesiology has been much neglected, although the study of it has gained traction over the past few decades.

### **An Application of James 3:1 Will Require Critical Thinking about Theological Method**

One of the biggest challenges one faces when seeking to apply James 3:1 to the local church is that our ecclesiology and method of interpretation is often not sufficiently canonical. The use of rotating elders, the plethora of teachers of doctrine and the unbalanced call for the use of every spiritual gift of teaching can be attributed in part to a lack of balance in reading both the Pauline epistles and the general epistles such as James. Whereas Paul encourages the use of spiritual gifts such as teaching, James (and others) provides balance. Arguably, where many have become teachers, the church has not given sufficient consideration to theological method and the need for considering the whole counsel of Scripture (Acts 20:27). When considering the discouragement of James and the encouragement of Paul about teaching in the church, the proper paradigm is that of tension, not contradiction.

The methodological issue that must be addressed is that of tension and contradiction in a canonical reading of James. When one reads of the congregation at Corinth, it appears that when they assembled many gifted people were present with a desire to share psalms, teachings, revelations, tongues and interpretations. As a result, Paul admonishes them to let "all things be done for edification" (1 Cor. 14:26). For Paul, his focus is on encouraging the use of teaching and edification gifts in the assembly. Some have concluded from Paul's focus on encouragement that James 3:1, "does not, of course, mean to discourage such people" as Sunday school teachers and Bible study leaders "from communicating their scriptural insights."<sup>1</sup> Yet discouragement does seem to be exactly what James is doing. The reference to "brothers" in James 3:1 as his implied readers makes it unlikely that James is merely suggesting that Christians test themselves to make sure that they are saved before they engage in teaching.<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand Paul explicitly encourages teachers in 1 Cor. 14:6-26 while James explicitly discourages teachers in James 3:1. But reading James as a word of discouragement against a multitude of teachers in the church does not have to stand in *contradiction* to Paul's statements in the first letter to the Corinthians.<sup>3</sup> There are good reasons for denying that contradiction is a necessary framework to use. First, the occasion for Paul's comments are based the great desire on the part of the Corinthians to experience manifestations of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 14:12). This lead to a scenario wherein those present were "immature" (1 Cor. 14:20) because they were not being "built up" by intelligible communication (1 Cor. 14:17). Furthermore, Paul himself

<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, Jr., *James* (Chicago: Moody, 1998), 146.

<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, Jr. *James*, 146.

<sup>3</sup> For a survey of James versus Paul on salvation by grace and obedience to the torah see Bruce Chilton, "James, Jesus' Brother", in *The Face of New Testament Studies*, ed. Scott McKnight and Grant Osborne (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker, 2004), 259.

connects teaching with the possibility of future eschatological judgment in 1 Cor. 9:27.<sup>4</sup>

The occasion and audience of James' epistle was likely Palestinian and not Greco-Roman/Corinthian.<sup>5</sup> There is evidence that James was dealing with inappropriate speech or teaching that sprang from jealousy and selfish ambition (James 3:16). Recognition that the letters of James and Paul were responses to different scenarios frees one from unnecessary conclusion that a reading of James 3:1 as a note of discouragement contradicts Paul's note of encouragement. Second, both texts can offer principles for a systematic ecclesiology. The principles of freedom to teach (as found in Paul) and restraint upon teaching (as found in James) can remain in *tension*.

The discouragement against teachers in James 3:1 as part of a wider tension in the New Testament is completely compatible with the genre of James and Old Testament wisdom. The context of James 3:1 includes a call for "wisdom" on the part of the reader/auditor: who is wise and understanding among you? (James 3:13). The wisdom theme is tied to the very genre of the whole epistle. Carson and Moo argue that its genre resembles that of a homily or series of homilies rooted in a Jewish wisdom tradition.<sup>6</sup> While wisdom sayings or wisdom literature does not generally constitute a universally valid law that must be applied in every situation, the imperative of James 3:1 is rooted in a universal eschatological judgment (James 3:1b). However, a proper understanding of the genre and Jewish worldview of James supports the framework of tension over the framework of contradiction. The so-called contradiction of Proverbs 26:45

<sup>4</sup> Peter Davids, *The Epistle of James. A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 136.

<sup>5</sup> "There is no warrant for associating James's warning specifically with an unregulated Pauline Church in whose meetings many speakers, more or less qualified, might intervene at will." Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 141.

<sup>6</sup> D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 630.



(don't answer the foolish argument... be sure to answer the foolish argument) is an example of how comfortable wisdom literature is with tension.<sup>7</sup> Understanding the situational nature of wisdom and wisdom literature is necessary for a canonical reading of James 3:1 with Paul's epistles. It allows us to read it with all of the illocutionary force of the imperative that James communicates in this text.

### **An Application of James 3:1 Will Require Critical Thinking about Teachers**

In order to apply James 3:1 we must think critically about the teachers that James is referring to. The command “do not let many of you become teachers” first begs the question: who are the “teachers” (*didaskaloi*) that James 3:1 is referring to? James 5:14 refers to the “elders of the church” but he only refers to “teachers” in 3:1. An application of this command for the church today demands that we further ask the question: should the teachers that James had in mind equate to the people who we normally think of as teachers today in our contemporary ecclesiastical context? These critical questions are unavoidable if the church desires a purposeful and reflective application of James 3:1 in the church today. The question that must be answered before application can be made to the church today is whether James 3:1 is referring to the teaching office (of elder) or to teachers in the church in general.

It is common to argue that James 3:1 is referring to the teaching “office” of elder or overseer.<sup>8</sup> Ralph Martin argues that entire pericope of James 3:1-18 refers to the “teaching office of the church.”<sup>9</sup> Martin's argumentation about the unity of the pericope is largely convincing although it requires some qualifica-

<sup>7</sup> Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Proverbs* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), 48-49.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas D. Lea, *Holman New Testament Commentary. Hebrews and James* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 311; James Adamson, *James. The Man and His Message* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 369.

<sup>9</sup> Ralph Martin, *James* (WBC 48; Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988), 103.

tions. He argues that James 3:1-18 is largely about an ecclesiastical setting or congregational worship. The use of the *sōma* imagery is primarily about the congregation: the teacher is like a rudder who can steer whole ship off course or set the whole forest on fire. It is quite likely that the whole pericope of James 3:1-18 is about teachers. Thus the primary message is that teachers who abuse their speech and let their tongues get out of control will soon become false teachers.<sup>10</sup> In this view, verses 13-18 function as a list of qualifications that one must meet before teaching in the congregation. Further references to the order or disorder of the congregation in verse 16 support this view.

The other position understands James 3:1 to refer to "authoritative and public transmission of tradition about Christ and the Scriptures."<sup>11</sup> It is not clear as to how much authority these teachers had, although if Martin is correct, they had the ability to set the whole congregation on fire. It may be that their authority was more practical or based on influence rather than an office such as elder. Evidence for this is based on the fact that James 3:13 addresses those who claimed to be "wise and understanding."<sup>12</sup> Thus, it is likely that the teachers were not official office holders necessarily but that they were charismatic teachers who had influence in the congregation due to their claim to have wisdom. The fact that offices and titles were rather fluid (compared to modern ideas of ecclesiastical offices) is seen from Jesus' own status as rabbi (Matt. 26:49; Mark 10:51; John 1:38, etc).<sup>13</sup> As MacArthur helpfully points out, Jesus was not an offi-

<sup>10</sup> Martin, *James*, 104.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Schreiner, "An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-15," in *Women in the Church. An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, ed. Andreas Köstenberger and Thomas Schreiner (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 101.

<sup>12</sup> PHEME PERKINS, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. First and Second Peter, James and Jude* (Louisville, TN: John Knox Press, 1995), 116.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 148.

cial rabbi but he gave interpretation in a synagogue service.<sup>14</sup> One did not necessarily have to be trained or recognized by a particular body to claim a title of teacher.

The “teachers” (*didaskaloi*) that James 3:1 is referring to are most likely those whom the congregation recognizes as an authoritative teacher. James could have referred to “elders” here but he does not (James 5:14). These teachers may not have held an office of elder or overseer but had influence and could sway the people in a negative direction. Thus, our thesis modifies Martin’s view in that James 3:1-18 can include the teaching office of elder or overseer but it is not restricted to it. The “teachers” are those who claim to be wise and are best viewed as active and influential sages in the community. This understanding of “teachers” has implications for application and developing a systematic ecclesiology. Contrary to MacArthur, this imperative does not apply only to those holding an office (of pastor, elder, or deacon).<sup>15</sup> It is meant to discourage people not only from taking the teaching office of pastor or elder but from public authoritative teaching about Christ and the Scriptures.

The implications for elders are further explored below. An additional reflection on small groups (cell groups) is appropriate since they are often the foundation for community in many churches. These groups are often led by a lay-person acting as a facilitator or a small group leader. Whether small group leaders should be men or women is beyond the scope of this paper but it is sufficient for this study to point out that most small group leadership involves some amount of teaching of Christ and the Scriptures. An application of the imperative of James 3:1 should lead churches to question who can be small group leaders and how they should be trained. Rotation of small group leaders may entail the rotation of teachers in the church—to its detriment. Alternatively, small groups could choose to be shepherding groups that are each led by an elder. Using elders in this

<sup>14</sup> John MacArthur, Jr., *James*, 146.

<sup>15</sup> John MacArthur, Jr., *James*, 146.

way will not only provide elders with an avenue to shepherd the flock directly, but they will also provide stability in the teaching functions of the small group.

### **An Application of James 3:1 Will Require Critical Thinking about Elders**

Some of the most in-depth resources about the office of elder do not interact substantially with the imperative of James 3:1.<sup>16</sup> One of the biggest problems in local churches that James 3:1 speaks to in terms of contemporary application is the problem of rotating elders. For those who agree with such an assessment, they will find themselves in the company of pastors and theologians who have penned recent books on practical ecclesiology. There are a host of problems that accompany rotating eldership. Mark Driscoll notes two prominent ones, the first and most important being the “lack of precedent in Scripture for such time limitations” and second, the “discontinuity in decision-making and oversight.”<sup>17</sup> In this study I want to explore an additional problem that must be considered by churches: *rotating elders multiplies teachers*. I offer several reflections on this problem in light of James 3:1.

The logic proposed here is rather straightforward and unavoidable: rotating elders multiplies teachers in the local church which is explicitly prohibited by James 3:1. This proposition is not so universal that it encompasses every church in every place. This is discussed in detail below. What is important to point out straightaway is that this proposition or logical syllogism will require a particular view of eldership. It could be argued that our syllogism falls apart as a *non-sequitur* because it

<sup>16</sup> The following offer only the briefest interaction: Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership. An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 1995), 272; Peter Toon et al, *Who Runs the Church. 4 Views on Church Government*, ed. Steven Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 215; Phil A. Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life. Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 85.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Driscoll, *On Church Leadership* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 78.

does not follow that rotating elders multiplies teachers. It must be admitted that a practical application of James 3:1 against rotating elders requires a particular view of eldership.

The churches that practice rotating eldership are not few. Denominations that practice rotating eldership include independent bible churches, Disciples of Christ,<sup>18</sup> Assemblies of God and Conservative Baptists. This group is significant even after we exclude Reformed and Presbyterian denominations that rotate elders in the local church but differentiate between ruling elders and teaching elders.

The temptation that elder boards will face is the ability to respond to doctrinal pluralism with apathy or determined relativism. Apathy may appear in those who throw up their hands and proclaim that the doctrinal differences amongst Protestants must mean that the bible says nothing about ecclesiology. Determined relativism is the rigid and firm position that no one is right. There is a great deal of irony in this position, which is a dogma itself. In the church where the sin of pride is acknowledged as so dangerous, deceptive and widespread, especially amongst those who are educated, the pastors or elders who stand against the rotation of elders may be automatically judged as prideful. One might hear the term “epistemological humility” thrown around. The argument goes: if one truly had humility about the knowledge or epistemological certitude we have about eldership and ecclesiology, then rotating eldership would not be a problem! The answer to such an argument must rely on Scripture. Qualifications and discussions about the hermeneutical spiral, critical realism and speaking the truth in love may need to take place. Not only does it not follow that a claim to truth is necessarily prideful, but the knowledge we are talking about deals with the Scripture.

A firm stand against rotating eldership requires understanding and affirming two concepts. First, it requires understanding

<sup>18</sup> Colbert S. Cartwright, *People of the Chalice. Disciples of Christ in Faith and Practice* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1987), 52.

that eldership is a teaching office. Due to space limitations let us consider two pieces of evidence. First, in Acts 6 where the “twelve” are overwhelmed by the administrative needs of the church, the “seven” are appointed to serve in order to free the “twelve” to devote themselves to “prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). There is indeed discontinuity between the “twelve” and the office of elder and between the “seven” and the office of deacon. Yet, it is widely argued that this passage reflects the division of labor as found in early ecclesiology as found in the writings of Paul, Peter, James, etc. The office of elder is a teaching office and is broadly based on the ministry of prayer and the word. A second stronger argument comes from the fact that the qualifications for the two offices of elder and deacon as found in 1 Timothy are equal except that overseers (*episkopos*) must be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2). The major distinction between elders and deacons in 1 Timothy is the ministry of the word. This reflects the distinction between the “twelve” and the “seven” and reinforces that argument. The text of James 3:1 will help to establish the biblical office of elder in the local church. This will require that the office elder be understood as a teaching office.

The second concept that must be affirmed is that the New Testament posits equality between what bishops, elders, overseers (and pastors). What is significant to note is that in the introductory chapter to *Five Views of Church Polity* (2004), the editors argue that the use of Greek words in the New Testament for elders and overseers are coterminous. The editors ask in the introduction, “one has to wonder whether, first, the evidence from the New Testament is as clear-cut as it seems on face value.”<sup>19</sup> The evidence that there are only two offices in the New Testament is very strong. Those seeking to apply James 3:1 to the problem of rotating elders must first wrestle through this evidence. To deny that elders must serve as pastors or shep-

<sup>19</sup> Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman (eds), *Five Views of Church Polity* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2004), 11.

herds of the flock through the ministry of the word will make it impossible to see how James 3:1 would have any practical effect on ecclesiology.

In sum, one cannot proceed with applying James 3:1 to the problem of rotating elders until a conceptual framework is formed from the biblical text. Even if the application of James 3:1 is rejected, it will at least be understood as a practical application derived from a synthetic and canonical reading of the New Testament.

### **An Application of James 3:1 Will Require Critical Thinking about Wisdom**

The rotation of elders is not necessarily a sin. Simply because it can be a sin or is often a sin does not necessitate that it is often a sin. When considering the matter of rotating elders, wisdom must prevail. Wisdom must prevail as the necessary approach to the issue because the prohibition against an abundance of teachers in the local church in James 3:1 is admittedly subjective. James does not give numbers against which we may measure our churches. Nor is James' *Sitz im Leben* of the first century so clear that we may accurately read behind the text. The question must be answered by readers who seek to apply this imperative today is this: how many is too many?

The postmodern context of the church in the 21st century requires several clarifications. First, the subjective nature of this question does not entail *radical* subjectivism so as to render any answer to this question useless. In others words, subjectivity does not necessitate total subjectivism or relativism. Simply because there are no quantitative boundaries given for this imperative upon local churches does not mean that it can be ignored or dismissed. The answer is to this self-imposed dilemma is an answer that the text of James itself demands: wisdom.

The answer to our question (how many teachers is too many?) is qualitative in that the answer must meet the criteria of wisdom and quantitative in that this answer must result in a numerical answer in each application. Wisdom will demand the

local church navigate the matter while rejecting the idea that no application can be made at all. Practically speaking the wisdom required to turn this biblical imperative into application will be found in the paradigm of knowledge as articulated by John Frame. Frame builds on the work of John Calvin and other Reformed theologians and suggests that one must know oneself, one must know the situation and one must know God.<sup>20</sup> The knowledge of God and knowledge of self come simultaneously so that they grow together. One must not necessarily adhere to Reformed doctrine to appropriate this paradigm of knowledge. As we apply this paradigm of knowledge to wisdom and the imperative of James 3:1 and the problem of rotating elders, the paradigm looks like this: know the people that make up the local church body, know the leaders and teachers in the local church body and know what God says about ecclesiology as thoroughly as possible.

Time can turn wisdom into legalism. As the local church evaluates the people, the teachers and the Scriptures in an attempt to apply James 3:1 to biblical eldership they will inevitably find a quantitative answer. Whether this answer gets incorporated into bylaws or the tradition of the church, the danger is treating this number as though it was a law or standard that is forever binding upon the church. The demand to use and apply wisdom in the local church will demand courage and test the wills of those who fall into traditionalism or legalism. A genuine application of James 3:1 to the local church will require periodic evaluation as the church grows bigger or smaller.

Churches who have a very long history will likely encounter this problem. Even those churches that could be categorized as “low-church” in their traditions will encounter problems. Tradition can be a barrier to wisdom when the leadership does not have the courage to obey biblical imperatives such as James 3:1. One solution to periodic evaluation could be incorporating a

<sup>20</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of Knowledge of God. A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 65.



quantitative answer into the church bylaws by indicating how many teachers or elders can be active at a time. But care must be taken not to write it so rigid that it will be continuously challenged by the growth of the church or by reoccurring or seasonal situations like vacation bible school.

### **An Application of James 3:1 Will Require Faith**

There are many good reasons not multiply teachers in the church. What probably comes to the mind of most people when they think of the problem of “too many cooks in the kitchen” are the practical ramifications. The church was not designed to run with a lot of chiefs and few Indians. But that isn’t the reason for James’ discouragement of teachers in James 3:1. His argumentation is eschatological rather than pragmatic. Contra Perkins, the eschatological heavenly court is in view and not the human courts referred to in James 2:7 (or both).<sup>21</sup> It is true that the readers/auditors of James were dragged into (human) courts by oppressive and wealthy rulers. God’s judgment is in view in James 2:23 where God *elogisthē* Abraham as righteous. The connection between the stricter judgment of James 3:1 and the reckoning action of God is conceptual as both are judging actions of God. The more immediate context is that of one’s status before God and therefore God’s own court that is the subject of the stricter judgment given to teachers in James 3:1.

Most Christians do not view church polity or structure in terms of sin or obedience. While there are certainly disagreements about polity and the nature and necessity of biblical offices few who have researched the matter would argue that the bible has nothing that must be obeyed. Yet practically speaking, many create mental boxes or categorize sin in such a way that prevents ecclesiological decisions from ever being sin. Sin is watching pornography or sin is swearing or getting drunk. Rarely are decisions about church government or polity cast in

<sup>21</sup> Perkins, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. First and Second Peter, James and Jude, 116.

terms of sin. This is what makes the text of James 3:1 so difficult to apply today, it forces us to think about church government and spiritual gifts and service in terms of something negative and possibly sinful.

The discouragement of James 3:1 is based not on pragmatic considerations of the present. Rather, all teachers in the church should expect stricter judgment. Failure to teach the church correctly will result in judgment before God. It is this eschatological reality that drives James 3:1 and his word of discouragement. If we follow Ralph Martin's conclusions as described above and understand James 3:1 as an integral part of the pericope from James 3:1-18, James does eventually cite pragmatic present concerns: selfish ambition is demonic and leads to disorder and every vile practice (James 3:16). Limiting the numbers of teachers of Scripture in the local church requires faith because the eschatological judgment must be understood by faith and the gravity of it grasped by faith.

## Conclusion

Motyer sums up the word of discouragement of James 3:1 as "if one should say to a group of young people at a vocation conference: Whatever you do, don't think of Christian service!"<sup>22</sup> As long as it is not professional Christian service that only comes to mind, Motyer's summary reflects the conclusions of this study. James 3:1 is a word of discouragement not only to those seeking the teaching office of elder or pastor; it is also a word of discouragement broad enough to encompass small group teachers, Sunday school teachers and others. Such a conclusion is as shocking as Motyer's own way of stating the meaning of James 3:1. Motyer is quick to admonish against making "heavy weather over a passing allusion."<sup>23</sup> This word of discouragement is a word of wisdom. On the other hand, this imperative is

<sup>22</sup> J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James. The Tests of Faith* (Downers Grove, IL/Leicester: IVP, 1985), 118.

<sup>23</sup> Motyer, *The Message of James*, 118.

stronger than a passing allusion. It is an imperative that requires critical thinking as well as an acknowledgement that sin against God in this matter is a genuine possibility. The error of the day is a view of spiritual gifts and ecclesiology in a manner that is so democratic and flippant that James 3:1 must be heard afresh in most evangelical churches. The paradigm suggested here follows John Frame’s development of Calvin’s axiom to know the flock, know those who seek to shepherd it through teaching and know the Scriptures.

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