

AN ELDER MUST NOT BE A NOVICE

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

The Greek word for “novice” is “*neophutos*”. Literally it means “something that is newly planted.” It is from this word that we get the English word “neophyte”. In the spiritual realm it refers to “a young convert or a novice”. He is new to the faith and more specifically new in the faith as well. He may be quite knowledgeable in the Word of God if he had been brought up in a Christian home. As far as head knowledge is concerned, he may be quite advanced in his understanding of the Word of God; but as far as his walk with God is concerned he has just taken his first few spiritual steps in a long journey toward heaven. This was the case in the days of the apostles when a Jew became a believer who may have had tons of knowledge of the OT because of his upbringing in a Jewish home. When he became a Christian, his knowledge of the OT would have been very useful. He would have been way ahead of many Gentile Christians in the church, being able to read the Hebrew Bible fluently. He would also have memorized large portions of the OT by heart as was the custom in those days. The qualifications mentioned in verses 2 and 3 would be difficult to ascertain in some cases and these individuals might think that their superior knowledge of the Bible would make them good candidates for eldership. However, the qualification in verse 6 says that this is not the case. He has not been tested yet. He has to prove himself through time tested trials and difficulties. Head knowledge must not be mistaken for experiential faith-directed knowledge.

We have to be careful to know the great difference between head knowledge and experiential knowledge. A case in point would be a Bible College student who cramps his mind with much Bible knowledge but has not gone through enough years to experience what he has learned. This is to be expected because he has not tasted enough of life's challenges. A young preacher being prepared for the fulltime pastoral ministry also falls into this category. He has gained a tremendous amount of Bible knowledge during his three to four years of Bible College education. However, he does not have the practice years. Courage to remain steadfast in the face of persecution and temptations as he continues to abound in the work of the Lord has not been seen in his life yet. There is no substitute for time tested experiences which a novice lacks. He has not lived enough on the earth to have experiential knowledge. In this sense he is still a novice. To put him into a position of leadership requires time. The souls of men, women and children are at stake. He may be apt to teach but he lacks life's experiences. He needs to remain faithful for the rest of his days on earth and not just for a few terms in office. Time of life in service will reveal whether he has the spiritual maturity to stand at the end. Potentially, a novice is a prime candidate for the evil one to fill him with pride and fall into the condemnation of the devil.

A leader who is young and inexperienced but with much head knowledge will be easily tempted. The temptation is the sin of pride. He is idealistic in his ideas and could readily preach messages without compassion or heart. He could be a great orator. Praises will come in great abundance and he will soon be lifted onto a pedestal. “He is a very good speaker/teacher for his age!” This will be one of the many comments that might be true but will inflate his young heart. Soon he will fall into the same sin that caused the devil to fall, the sin of pride.

Hence, the phrase “fall into the condemnation of the devil.” The devil cannot condemn anyone. It is not his role to do so. When a person falls into the sin of pride, the devil will encourage him to sin more and more. The sin of pride is a deadly sin that has already ruined innumerable young preachers and potential pastors. If only they or the church had waited for maturity to set in; then perhaps such a young gifted individual would have become a faithful and humble servant of God. Today, the horizon of Christian service is littered with so many broken lives and failed Christian leaders. There is a Bible College graduate who topped his class every year. By the time he graduated, there was so much hype about this new bright star. Within a few years of his graduation he was ordained. Time revealed him to be a man without a backbone. He was silent in most of the leadership meetings. Today he is nothing but a puppet on a string of some of the “powerful” and moneyed people in his church. This young man was promoted too fast and it went to his head. In the end, he became nothing but a tool of Satan!

The phrase "the condemnation of the devil" does not mean that the devil will condemn, but rather it means the same kind of condemnation by God on the devil. The sin of the devil is found in **Isaiah 14:12-15** (KJV), "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! *how* art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! **13** For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: **14** I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. **15** Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit." The devil wanted to be like God when he was in heaven. It was the height of arrogance on the part of the devil to be like the most High. He was punished severely by God and became the Fallen Angel. He is also known as Satan now which means an adversary of God. The name “devil” means “slanderer”. He will use words to lie and discredit the name of Christ and the work of God through His servants.

It has to be noted at this juncture that it is not wrong to be like God; for after salvation every believer is commanded to become more and more like Christ. This is the reason why God gave gifts to His church. **Ephesians 4:11-13** (KJV), "And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; **12** For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: **13** Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." However, when the devil or any man wants to be like God by his own way and not by the way of Christ, then it is sinful and arrogance on man's part to think that he could be like God. Man is a depraved sinner the moment he exists in his mother's womb. To be like God on man's terms is idolatry and fueled by the deception of the devil. The devil failed and has been trying to be like God all his existence via the many false religions that he has created all through the ages. This is the devil's ploy that has succeeded in leading millions into hell. The people of God must not fall into this sin of pride.

Satan tempts Christians so that when they fall into sin, their own sins will bring condemnation upon them. God will condemn for the sin of pride as well, which is a sin that will result in a family of other sins. When pride sets in, the leader is not teachable. He thinks he knows it all. He becomes arrogant and pig-headed in his ways. “My way is the only right way” will be his philosophy of life. Anyone who proposes an alternate view to his will be quickly put down

and termed as insubordinate. He will resort to “politics” to establish his position of leadership. This will inevitably lead to a “yes man” system whereby all the leaders around him are expected to be his echo. Intimidation will be used at all meetings where his word becomes law. His dogmatic ways will send the church in the direction of self destruction. It will only be a matter of time before he would fall into a grievous sin because he has no more accountability to regulate his decisions and way of life. Lives will be stumbled and the name of Christ will be dragged through the mud. A novice cannot be made an elder too soon!

There is no instant maturity and growth. A novice needs time to grow and mature. He cannot speed up the growth. But time alone will not automatically turn a novice into a mature Christian. The list of qualifications must be found in him. There are some Christians who think that growing old and spiritual maturity will naturally go together. This is not true. There is no wisdom in a hoary head if the hoary head has not been living by faith and walking with Christ through the study of God’s perfect Word. The Bible says in Proverbs 16:31, “The hoary head is a crown of glory, **if it be found in the way of righteousness.**” [emphasis added] There are no automatic mature and godly Christians. They have to make a deliberate choice to want to grow in grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. They should not simply let time pass, do nothing and hope that suddenly when old age hits, they become mature Christians. It is a life-long exercise of discipline in prayer, walking by faith and the serious in-depth study of God’s Holy and perfect Word. This takes time and genuine spiritual experiences with God as they are purified by the fire of persecution. In God's time they will mature and grow and others around them will be able to notice the transformation, from novice to maturity.

Every elder must be mature in his faith and walk with God. Making a novice an elder is a sure way of endangering the cause of Christ, himself, his family, and the church. This warning must be taken seriously. God's Word is never wrong. Amen.