

As we approach an election for up to 4 elders for our church in coming weeks, I want to consider this morning the personal qualifications for eldership. What kind of person should an elder be? In the passages we have just read, the apostles Paul and Peter use 2 different Greek words for the English term “overseer” or “elder” - and it is clear from the passages that the words are used interchangeably. The first Greek word, is presbuteros and the second is episkopos. The original meaning of presbuteros is “old man” or bearded one”. Episkopos means literally to “watch over”, “look after” or “care for”. Perhaps this helps to explain why Paul, in particular, uses the two different words to refer to an elder. Presbuteros points to the character of the elder and indicates that they are to be men characterized by dignity, maturity and wisdom. Episkopos, on the other hand, describes the elder’s function - to superintend and guard the church, to have responsibility for oversight of the spiritual and personal needs of the local church. The primary goal of elders is to edify and equip those they lead, thus enabling them to grow in their faith and contribute to the body of Christ, the local congregation of God’s people.

The character of the elder has everything to do with the success of the work. We could almost assume this to be true, but the Holy Spirit has left us in no doubt about the matter. In the 3 passages we read this morning, there are spelled out in some detail the qualifications of those to be chosen and elected to the office of elder.

Anyone seriously considering these qualifications would be ready to throw up his hands and resign the office, or never undertake it in the first place, if we did not know that God who sets the standard also provides the grace to attain it. This is our assurance, even as it was Paul’s himself. As he said to the Corinthian Christians: “Not that we are competent in ourselves.....but our competence comes from God” (2 Corinthians 3: 5). Whilst all elders should evidence something of these qualifications in their lives, none will exhibit them all perfectly all of the time. Like Paul, who was only too aware of his imperfections, we should exhibit the constant desire for God to be changing us into his image.

I believe that if we look at these 3 passages together we will find that the Scriptural qualifications for eldership can be gathered together under three headings which will help us to see the kind of men God intends the elders he calls to be.

1. Single-minded, spiritual men.

The elder must be wholeheartedly committed to God. Christ is clearly his Lord, and the elder’s chief desire is to ascertain God’s will for his life and to do it. Of course, he is human and so he may, at times, become distracted and even slip, but overall the main direction of his life is plain to see - he is devoted to his Lord and his service.

The eldership is a spiritual office. Neither wealth, nor status in society nor a good education is a requirement, but it is absolutely essential for an elder to be a man of God. When Paul says in 1 Timothy 3: 1, “If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer (elder), he desires a noble task”, he suggests that a prospective elder should find an aspiration to this calling, a desire to do this work, developing in his heart. More and more, he should find that he is wanting to serve the people of God, the local church of which he is part, in this way.

Very few elders come ready made, so to speak, with all of the qualifications set out in these 3 passages. Many, probably most, will feel that they have not fulfilled the requirements for elders set out by Paul and Peter. What we should come to terms with is that newly-appointed elders generally have to learn to be elders - to grow into the eldership. Their own experience of Christ qualifies them for eldership and their aim should be for their character to grow and develop into the fullness of the character of the elder described in these passages. The very fact that they will be part of a group of elders, the Session, accountable to one another and to the Lord should help, and the knowledge that the Holy Spirit leads and empowers God’s people daily, giving gifts and

graces to each one, should also be a deep encouragement to take on this vital ministry in response to the Lord's call.

Paul makes it clear that the elder must "not be a recent convert" (1 Timothy 3: 6) - that is, he must be mature in the faith. Singleness of mind is a quality that indicates maturity, and it is usually developed in the experience of Christian life and service, especially through times of hardship and struggle and doubt. This maturity should show through in the elder's love of God's Word and his openness to the work of the Holy Spirit in his life. He should be deeply grounded in the Word of God. Paul says in Titus 1: 9 - "he must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it". How else can he minister to the person in the church who needs encouragement or instruction or warning in relation to practical living as a Christian in the family, in the workplace or in the life of the church? How else can he expose and refute those who oppose God's truth and standards? Indeed, Paul says that an elder should be "able to teach" (1 Timothy 3: 2). This is not to say that every elder will have gifts in preaching and expounding God's Word but all will have the ability to instruct others, explaining God's truth to them, and to expose error.

Finally this spiritual maturity should show through, too, in his willingness to be an intercessor in prayer for the people of the congregation both in the corporate prayer meetings of the church and in his own private prayer every day.

## 2. Men of Godly Character

Godly words must, in the elder, become flesh and blood, that is, he must live them out. Even if there were no human eyes to see, godliness would still be a requirement because God looks upon the heart as we see in 1 Samuel 16: 7.

In relation to his character, the elder must first be "above reproach" or "blameless". Clearly this doesn't mean that he must be faultless in both his character and conduct - for he is still a frail and faltering human being. But it does mean that he should be a man whose life is characterized by moral integrity. Paul makes it clear that this blamelessness has to be something that is not only recognized by believers, but is recognized and appreciated by non-believers, too. "He must also have a good reputation with outsiders", Paul says in 1 Timothy 3: 7. In other words, a person who is going to be suitable for this kind of leadership in the church of Jesus Christ must, as a minimum requirement, be a man who, both in the fellowship of believers and in the secular world, is known as someone who clearly exhibits what biblical, Christian morality is all about.

What about the requirement that he must be "the husband of but one wife"? This cannot mean that he must be a married man. Rather, if the elder is married, he must be an example to others of faithfulness to his one and only marriage partner and be known to be of the highest and purest standards of sexual morality.

Thirdly, under this heading of a godly character, an elder should be "temperate, self-controlled and respectable" (1 Timothy 3: 2). Many decisions and activities of the elder require the good sense of a man who is serious-minded, disciplined and well-balanced. A man who is concerned to think his thoughts after God, and so turns to the Bible for guidance in decision making and in giving advice. A man for whom integrity, carefulness and faithfulness really matter. The orderly, dignified manner of life of the elder should attract others to Jesus Christ. And he must be self-controlled. How often has the work of God literally been set back because of a minister or elder who could not control his emotions or his tongue! The peace and prosperity of the Church require men who can express their convictions in and out of the church courts with love, grace and forbearance. And he must be able to keep confidences. It is hard for church members to submit joyfully to a man who does not demonstrate that his own spirit is submitted to the Lord. On the other hand, the elder who always tempers his exercise of authority with kindness, gentleness and self-control, will find a people gladly submissive in the Lord.

The elder's godly character will also be shown in his being "hospitable". The Greek word used by Paul here in 1 Timothy 3:2 suggests the capacity to be a friend to those he already knows who need to feel and experience the warmth of the Christian home and church, and to become a friend of the stranger whom he does not know. In much of the work of the eldership, the support and encouragement of his wife (if he is married) is so important for the elder, and this is specially so in the area of hospitality. The elder whose home is an open-house and who has a warm fatherly (or brotherly) heart will encourage the whole church in this virtue.

Another characteristic upon which Scripture puts a great deal of emphasis - and this comes through strongly in Peter's words - is that of humility. This emphasis is not difficult to account for. Just because the office is so exalted and honourable, only the humble man is fit to hold it - the one who is willing to admit his faults and gladly serve others, even sacrificially, following Christ's example. The elder is, in reality, a wonderful combination of ruler and servant. And it is not at all difficult in the midst of weighty decision-making and the pressures of congregational concerns, both in relation to individuals and the whole church, for the ruler to forget that he is also a servant. Therefore, he must constantly pray for a humble attitude. This is especially important within the Session itself as it seeks to direct the local church to both progress and peace in Christ - that the elders should have an evident attitude of servanthood seen in the humble acceptance of and submission to one another.

Finally an elder should not be "greedy for money" (1 Peter 5: 2) or "a lover of money" (1 Timothy 3: 3). A man who tries to love Christ while at the same time loving money will find a constant tension of conflicting loyalties which can only ruin his spiritual calling. The effective elder will see his money as merely a provision from the Lord to help him fulfil and enjoy his life's calling. He will be faithful and generous-hearted in his stewardship of his material resources (especially his money) and of all the other gifts God has given him.

### 3. Men of Leadership

The elder should possess qualities which will, in various ways, enable him to lead the Lord's people. For a start, he should lead by example in his attendance at, and involvement in, the public gathering together of God's people for worship on the Lord's Day, for regular Bible study and for prayer.

But the eldership calls not only for godly maturity but also for gifts of wisdom, discernment, organization and initiative that not all men possess. Some maturing Christian men are peculiarly suited to the office of the eldership in this respect. Others seem better suited by their gifts to be members of the Board of Management or to serve as deacons. Each member of the body of Christ, the local church, has his or her particular calling in the church using the gift or gifts that the Holy Spirit has given to that individual. The man, called of God to the office of eldership, will be increasingly equipped with the special gifts and graces with which to fulfil his role as a ruler and servant in the life of the local church.

One place where there should be evidence of the elder's leadership qualities is in the home. The Holy Spirit through the apostle Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 3: 4-5 that the elder must make a major priority of his home, its spiritual character, its orderliness and its welfare. The total good and well-being of his wife and children will be ever before him. A prospective elder learns in the context of family life - its joys, sorrows, disappointments, contentment and heartache - he learns the patience and devotion which must be given to the flock of God, the whole family of God in the local church. As he pleads with God for his wife and children, so he will learn to plead with God for others under his care. As I mentioned earlier, unmarried men are not excluded from the office of elder and, again,

their family relationships - with parents in particular - must evidence that they have the ability to work on behalf of and care for the congregation of God's people.

How are we to interpret the reference in Titus 1: 6 to the prospective elder's children being "believers"? I believe that we should interpret these words written to Titus alongside the passage in 1 Timothy 3, which rightly, in verses 4-5, focuses our examination upon the way in which the man in question raises his family. The primary qualification that Paul puts forward in 1 Timothy 3 is that the elder's children must obey and respect him. In Titus 1: 6, we are also told that the children must not be "open to the charge of being wild and disobedient". Paul tells us in Ephesians that fathers are not to "exasperate" their children. In this light, we may safely interpret the word "believe" (or "are believers" in some translations) in Titus 1: 6 as meaning "are faithful or trustworthy". If the children of a prospective elder consistently and openly disregard authority, either by rebellion or laziness, it is appropriate to investigate whether their father has been overly harsh or lenient in his treatment of them. Either of these qualities would be disastrous in an elder. We may also note from the Bible, cases where very godly men such as Samuel and David were succeeded by ungodly children. This did not disqualify their fathers from God's service nor bring them any apparent censure from God. The fact is that no father - no matter how rigorously he teaches, prays for and guides his children - can guarantee faith in his children. Only God can do that. What Paul seems to be requiring here of an elder or prospective elder is that he establish within his family an atmosphere of godliness that is acknowledged and respected by his children - whether or not they ultimately believe.

The second type of evidence of leadership ability is having a shepherd's heart. An elder serves because of his devotion to and enthusiasm for the task of shepherding. "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers - not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be", says Peter (1 Peter 5: 2). The elder has an abounding interest in the welfare of the sheep. The attention of the church will have been increasingly drawn to his humble devotion and selfless commitment before being elected to the task. If I am an elder and shepherd, my example will always influence Christ's sheep, for I will be "leading them out" for him.

How can we summarise what the New Testament writers, those trusted apostles of Christ, have to tell us about the qualifications for eldership - what kind of man an elder should be? T.G. Campbell, in his little book, "The Work of the Eldership", summarises the issue most succinctly when he says - "The essential qualifications of the elder are that he loves God's Son, God's Book, God's House (Household/Family), God's Day and God's Footstool". Is this not a challenge to the character and spiritual life of the elder who would see his work as "a noble task"? May the Lord raise up for us here at Canterbury such elders to his glory and for our blessing.

Amen

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