

(1 Timothy 3:1-7; Exodus 18:13-26; Luke 10:29-37)

We looked at this passage (1 Timothy 3:1-7) about this time last year as we prepared for an election for new elders. And it is good to look at it again this morning, not just because we hope to have a further election for elders towards the end of this year but also because it reminds us to treat those whom God has called to be elders - to exercise spiritual oversight of this church - with respect (and affection) and to pray for them.

1. A Noble Task

Elders should be treated with respect, for the Bible holds their office in high esteem: "Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task" (v.1). The Greek word for "overseer" is episkopos, which is sometimes translated as "bishop". In the New Testament - in Acts 20:17-38, for example - the words for elder (presbuteros) and bishop (episkopos) are used interchangeably. This is true in 1 Timothy as well, since Paul later calls the overseers "elders" (1 Timothy 5:17). From Scripture it is clear that there is no difference in rank among the elders of the church. Hierarchical forms of church government go beyond the teaching of Scripture. The biblical pattern for the church is spiritual governmental by a plurality of elders. All the overseers are brothers in ministry. As we shall see later, there is a difference between teaching elders (sometimes known as pastors or ministers) and ruling elders. But the difference lies only in their function, not in their authority. A minister is not superior in rank to a ruling elder.

The point of Paul's trustworthy saying is that the work of an overseer is honourable. It has a long and rich tradition among the people of God. The first elders were appointed by Moses to teach and to judge the children of Israel, as we saw in Exodus 18. Throughout the Old Testament, God's people were represented and governed by elders who sat in the city gates and taught in the synagogues, in the later Old Testament times. The same was true in the New Testament. On their missionary journeys Paul and Barnabas and Paul and Silas appointed elders in all the churches. So by the time Paul wrote to Timothy, the elder was a well-established officer in the church. The work of an overseer is good work involving the oversight of God's people. By ruling and teaching, elders supervise the spiritual life of the church. And if such oversight is good work, then it is also good for men to seek it. So godly men should strive to become elders in the church. This does not mean that eldership should be an ambition. No one ever decides to become an officer of the church on his own. That is for the church to decide, led by the Holy Spirit, following guidelines set forth in this passage and also Titus 1:5-9 and 1 Peter 5:1-4. Yet the outward call of the church is always matched by the inward call of the man. God calls and the church confirms that call. Serving as a minister or elder can be a worthy aspiration without becoming a blind ambition. Why does the Bible bother to say that an overseer does good work? Possibly because the task is so daunting - shepherding the flock Christ purchased with his own blood. Yet it is a noble work which carries its own inherent dignity and attractiveness, because it is performed in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and brings about the welfare of the whole church.

Oversight is good work, but only if you are qualified for it. What are God's requirements? Paul lists them in vv. 2-7. Will any man meet all of these requirements? In some of these areas he will likely need to develop and grow. Holding to the conviction of elders being enabled and gifted by God does not by-pass a man's responsibility to work hard and critically on himself, seeking to improve in all areas applicable to his eldership.

2. The Elder's Morals

The first qualification encompasses all the others: "the overseer must be above reproach". The integrity of an elder must be beyond question. He cannot be sinless, but must commend the Christian way of life by his own mature qualities and exemplary behaviour.

To be above reproach, an elder must be "the husband of but one wife". This does not prohibit bachelors from serving as elders. Remember that Paul himself was single and commended singleness to others as an opportunity for greater service in the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 7:17). What Paul probably means is that elders must be morally accountable for their sexuality. In

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the world of Paul's day, marriage was undermined by frequent divorce, widespread adultery and rampant homosexuality. How should the church take its stand against such sexual immorality? God wants the leaders of the church to be living examples of biblical marriage - one man and one woman in a love covenant for life.

The next several qualifications have to do with the elder's judgment. He must be "temperate, self-controlled and respectable". "Temperate" means sober-minded, or vigilant. A vigilant elder notices spiritual needs and warns of spiritual dangers. The word "self-controlled" has to do with decision-making. Men who make vital decisions about the ministry of the church must be prudent. They must have balanced judgment. When elders do not weigh their decisions carefully, the church is vulnerable to all the latest trends in ministry and theology. Then elders are to be "respectable" - orderly and well-mannered. Among other things, this applies to their drinking habits. Although he need not be a teetotaler, a respectable elder is "not given to drunkenness." The Greek philosophers sometimes used the word for "drunkard" to refer to violence, like a drunken rage. What comes next, therefore, is not surprising: an elder is "not violent but gentle". Men who are verbally, physically or emotionally abusive cannot be trusted to tend God's sheep. Instead elders must be "gentle" - gracious, kindly, forbearing and considerate. Of course, an elder must be firm when he rebukes sin. But an elder must be gentle. He must live among God's people like a tender shepherd. He must be sympathetic with the weak and compassionate to the wounded.

Furthermore, an elder must not be "quarrelsome". Very likely, Paul had the false teachers in mind when he wrote this, for they were starting to cause much trouble, their disputes resulting in "envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction" (1 Timothy 6:4-5). An argumentative man is the worst kind of man to have on a Session. When elders discuss the ministry of the church, they need to express their opinions clearly and charitably because the best decisions come from lively discussion. At times, it is even appropriate for objections to be raised. But this must never be done with a contentious spirit.

Nor must an elder be "a lover of money...". Most of chapter 6 of 1 Timothy is taken up with issues of wealth and poverty. Issues related to money come up often in the history of the church. There have been and continue to be men (like some televangelists and others) who try to use the ministry for financial gain. Being rich does not disqualify a man from the eldership, but it does not recommend him for it, either. What matters is how he uses his money, and especially how much affection he has for it. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews warns, "Keep you life free from love of money, and be content with what you have" (13:5). It is this kind of contentment a man must have to serve as an elder in the church.

3. The Elder's Duties

Most of the qualifications on Paul's list explain who elders are rather than what they do. This is because "the usefulness of an elder will depend in the long run more on his character than on his gifts and knowledge". But there are 2 requirements here that show us something about the duties of an elder. The first is that elders are to be "hospitable". Literally they are to show "love for strangers". This is helpful for our ministry here at CPC since part of the way we show hospitality to students (and others) from Korea and Japan is to welcome them and help them adjust to life in Melbourne, Australia. Being hospitable is a requirement of all Christians (Romans 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9), but the congregational leaders were to give the lead in meeting the social and travelling needs of fellow-Christians in the early church (Hebrews 13:2; 3 John 5-8). This meant offering bed and board to Christians travelling around the Roman empire (Acts 16:14f; 21:7f; 28:13f). So today, as they have opportunity, elders should take the lead in entertaining missionaries and Christian workers. The underlying principle is that elders must make a personal commitment to the worldwide work of the gospel. Hospitality - which would also include taking someone out for a meal or coffee - can also be a means of evangelism or pastoral care.

This brings us to the qualification that lies closest to the heart of the elder's work. He must be "able to teach". An elder must have wisdom, said Calvin, "in knowing how to apply God's word to the profit of the people". As far as teaching is concerned, most Presbyterian churches follow 1 Timothy 5:17 in making a distinction between teaching and ruling elders. All the elders direct the affairs of the church - some concentrate on teaching and preaching. Typically, the principal work of the minister is to teach the Bible. A minister may do many other things as well. He may use his gifts in leading worship, discipleship, pastoral care, administration and so on. But first and foremost the minister is a bible teacher, and thus in some way he exercises the ministry of God's Word in every aspect of his calling. However, this qualification is for ruling elders as well. Their teaching may take place in a variety of contexts, which for some, but not all, may include preaching, as well as home Bible studies and other groups. They also teach whenever they disciple, make pastoral visits or evangelise. In his letter to Titus, Paul said that elders must be able to "encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9).

4. The Elder's Family

A man does not become an overseer overnight. Rather eldership is a calling and task that requires prior experience. The most important place for an elder to get this experience is at home: "he must manage his own family well, and see that his children obey him with proper respect" (v. 4). The family life of an elder should be exemplary. The same must be true of a man's relationships at work, or in other areas of public involvement. Leadership in these areas is especially important for bachelor elders, who do not have the full benefit of family relationships as a proving ground for ministry.

The Greek word translated "manage" has two primary meanings. One is to supervise, and the other is to nurture or be concerned. The father is the leader who governs the household, but the way he does this is by caring for the needs of each family member. Elders do the same thing in the household of God: they exercise their spiritual authority both by governing and by caring. What does it mean for the overseer to "see that his children obey him"? How can a father encourage his children to be obedient? Here Paul gives us a hint: "with proper respect". Obviously it refers to the way the children treat their father. But it also describes the way the father relates to his children - he treats them like people made in the very image of God, and therefore he promotes a relationship of mutual respect. The best way to grow obedient children is not to control or manipulate them, but to respect them. This means being fair, consistent, sympathetic and merciful. The importance of an elder's family life is obvious: "If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" Obviously, a man has to have his own house in order before he can keep God's house in order. The word used for "manage" in verse 5 is rich in its practical implications. It appears only one other time in the New Testament. Jesus used it when he told the parable of the Good Samaritan. We are told that the Samaritan had compassion on the Jewish man who had been mugged and left for dead. He attended to his wounds, took him to an inn and "took care" of him. The Samaritan is a beautiful example for fathers and elders. Taking care of people always demands sacrifice. It includes compassion, healing and embrace. Doubtless the Samaritan had his own busy schedule with a long list of things he needed to get done. But good neighbours - like good fathers and good elders - are willing to be inconvenienced by other people's problems.

5. The Elder's Experience and Reputation

The last two requirements are not simply for the church, but also for the good of the elder himself. First, "he must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil" (v. 6). This qualification has to do with spiritual maturity. In examining a man for eldership, a church should count his spiritual age, not his biological age. A young man in his late 20s or early 30s who has known the Lord from childhood is hardly a recent convert. A new convert may be full of zeal but he is not ready to be an elder. The Greek word for "become conceited" originally referred to something that was filled with smoke. It is sometimes taken to mean "puffed up with conceit". New converts may grow so fast in the Christian life that they may be tempted to

(1 Timothy 3:1-7; Exodus 18:13-26; Luke 10:29-37)

look down on others. Yet pride is the most dangerous of character traits in an elder, who must be the servant of all. There is another way to understand the reference to smoke, however. The danger may be that a new convert will become clouded in his judgment. The smoke of false doctrine can be blinding. In all likelihood, one of the problems with the false teachers in Ephesus was that they were new believers, which helps explain why Paul gave this qualification for elders.

Secondly, and as a final qualification, Paul says, “he must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap” (v. 7). The qualification is a reminder that the church is in the world, and that in the ordination of elders, some consideration must be given to the non-Christian public. This may explain why many of the qualifications Paul gives for elders represent the highest virtues of pagan (secular) culture. An elder must have excellent references outside as well as inside the church. If people do not think highly of a church’s leaders, they will not think highly of the church. The church has enough critics and detractors already without putting unqualified men (in terms of 1 Timothy 3:1-7) of dubious reputation into the eldership. John Chrysostom, the church father from Constantinople, made an excellent observation about the verse. He pointed out that although Paul and the other apostles were often persecuted, they were never brought up on morals charges. The way the apostles lived made the message - not the messenger - the issue. Surely this is an example, not just for elders, but for every believer. How easy it would be to win the world for Christ if every believer behaved like a true follower of Jesus. As it is, we find ourselves having to defend the followers of the gospel as often as we defend the gospel itself.

The qualifications Paul gives for elders end on an ominous note, with two references to the great enemy, Satan. If new converts are rushed into office, they may “fall under the same judgment as the devil”. Or an elder with a bad reputation may “fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap”. These warnings lead us to an obvious conclusion: Satan is out to get the elders of the church. What better way to frustrate God’s plans for the church of Jesus Christ than to overthrow the elders he has appointed to lead it? By making mention of the devil, Paul reminds elders to be on their guard. Watch out for temptation. Use good judgment. Defend sound doctrine. Be peaceable. Take care of your family. Resist the devil. At the same time, Paul’s warning is a reminder to every Christian to pray urgently for the elders of the church, who are subject to very intense spiritual warfare.

Please pray urgently and regularly for the elders here at Canterbury and pray, too, that the Lord would call and raise up one or two more later this year to join us in the crucial work of shepherding God’s flock here at Canterbury Presbyterian Church.

Amen