

## 2 The Biblical Qualifications for the Eldership

All our doctrinal foundations are in Holy Scripture, and that is therefore the charter from which the very existence of eldership arises. 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus are often called the Pastoral Epistles because they deal with such themes as church order and the lives of those who are office bearers within the church. In considering the biblical qualifications for the eldership, I want to base my comments on 1 Timothy 3.1-7.

Here is a trustworthy saying: "If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgement as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so the he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap." In this passage (cf. Titus 1.6-9), we have a fairly detailed list of qualifications for the office of elder and I believe it is important for all who aspire to the eldership (v 1) to be aware of and study these. For example, in v 5 Paul sees the elder in a situation which is parallel to the manager of his own home. "If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?"

### Caretakers of God's Church

The clear implication is that elders are called to take care of the church of God. Not, you will notice, *their* church but *God's* church. They are to be caretakers. We use the word of someone who is taking care of another's property and in that sense the caretaker is self-evidently not the owner; the place he is looking after doesn't belong to him. We have a lot of caretakers in the centre of the city of Glasgow where I minister and some time ago one of them was delighted to show me round a vast office building for which he was responsible. It was a most beautiful place. But everywhere we went he said to me, "Come and I'll show you my managing director's office ... Come and I'll show you my boardroom ... Come and see my general office ...". He talked as if the whole building belonged to him!

We have to be careful not to slide into that kind of attitude towards the church. All too often many office-bearers tend to speak and think like that office caretaker. But we must recognise afresh that the church of which we are caretakers is God's church and not ours. It is God's church in that he has a particular love for it having purchased it with the blood of His Son. We are to understand that he has ordained and appointed elders in order to express through them the profound care he has for the church. It is as though God is taking this extraordinarily precious possession of his and saying, "Care for this for me." Can you imagine the Crown Jewels being entrusted to you and some high officer of state saying, "Will you look after these for me?" Imagine it - you would drop everything you were doing and you would do all you possibly could in order to discharge such a commission faithfully. Do we not realise that the living God has presented to us what are going to be the jewels in his crown on the Last Day? For the church of his only begotten Son is nothing less than his "crown jewels". And he says to you and me, "Care for that for me!"

We should not therefore be surprised that God gives to us extraordinary qualifications for the eldership. We would expect him to be exceedingly careful about this when he has bought this church with the blood of Christ. He is continuing to build his church through the work of Christ in our generation and he is beautifying it by the work of the Holy Spirit so that one day it may appear in all its glory. Can you understand why the qualifications of the church's "caretakers" are of such a profoundly challenging nature?

### Qualifications

I want to consider these qualifications under six areas of living. Please don't think I am trying to compartmentalise them; simply identifying them under six headings for the sake of clarity.

### 1. *The Elder's Personal Life*

Paul comes to the elder's personal life as the first priority in v 2 where he says, "Now the overseer must be above reproach". That simply means that the primary qualification for Christian leadership in the church is not that we are greatly gifted or well educated but that we have a consistent personal character. That is the first and the last thing that Paul writes about. Notice in v 7, "He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap". So the primary emphasis is on the elder's personal life, "above reproach" amongst those who are around him within the fellowship and of "good reputation" amongst those who are outside the church of Christ, that is in the world. Paul spells that out in a little more detail in v 2, for example, where he speaks about the need to be "temperate, self-controlled, respectable" or (*orderly*) and so on. And one of the places where that *self-control* will reveal itself, says Paul (v 3), is in the use of alcohol - "...not given to drunkenness". (Cf v 8 where the same standard is set forth for deacons).

The whole of this interest in the Christian character is quite fundamental. It is for this reason that the general testimony of Scripture is that my usefulness in the service of God is closely tied with my personal character, so that what *I am* matters more to God than what *I do*. Inner consistency in my own life is therefore going to be the crucial thing in my usefulness. That is why when Peter is speaking about the task of the shepherd he says elders must be examples to the flock of God (1 Peter 5.3). That is why when writing to young Timothy, Paul tells him not to mind about his age but to be an example: "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (1 Tim. 4.12). The point is that men and women are going to be far more impressed by what we are than by what we say or do. That is why the primary area in this study must be our personal lives.

### 2. *The Elder's Domestic World*

"The overseer must be ... the husband of but one wife" (v 2). Much discussion has arisen about what is intended by this requirement. However, I think the most obvious meaning is likely to be the most accurate, namely, that the one who is being called to the eldership will need to be an example in the realm of the biblical norm of absolute faithfulness within the marriage bond. I believe that is what Paul has in mind here. He is referring to an exclusive, permanent, loving relationship between one man and one woman.

Paul goes on to elaborate on this domestic issue. A leader in the church of God must first prove himself to be a leader in his home who has gained the respect of his own family. "He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (vv 4-5). Quite simply, Paul is saying that our family life ought to be a microcosm of the church of Jesus Christ. The children of such an elder should obey him because they respect his wisdom, his selfless care for his family and the quality of leadership and example which he is providing. This is a qualification for the eldership because that ought to be how he will act within the church of God. Paul's point is that if he is not living like that within his own home there is very little likelihood that he will suddenly start to live like that within the church.

### 3. *The Elder's Relationships*

The third area is that of human relationships beyond the home. "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). Again in verse 2, "...not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome ...". We all know that some people are peacebreakers rather than peacemakers. But the elder, on the contrary, must be *gentle*, meaning patient and forbearing with people - long-tempered not short-tempered. That is extended not only to our dealings with people and our attitudes towards them, but also to our words when we speak about them. Notice v 11: "In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, *not malicious talkers* but temperate and trustworthy in everything". The issue of how we (and our wives) talk about other people is important enough to be a criterion for the eldership.

In our human relationships with those outwith the church we also need to be an example. We all know there are some people whose human relationships leave an enormous amount to be desired. It is very damaging to the church when an elder has the reputation, within or outwith the church, for being a frosty, difficult, angular, obtuse character. Alas, there are such elders. Do you see how what they are doing is disgracing the name of Christ? The elder, the servant of God, says Paul, is to be gentle and that can only come from self-control.

#### *4. The Elder's Business Life*

Fourthly, we have the sphere of financial affairs. There are two places where Paul touches on this: "Not a lover of money ...not pursuing dishonest gain" (vv 3 & 8), the second of which refers to deacons. The elder must be crystal clear about his motives in serving God and his people and financial gain must never be one of them. Each of these two phrases makes a specific point. The first, "Not a lover of money" indicates that elders' attitudes towards money must be that of sitting so lightly to it that they have learned to live both with and without it. The second phrase, "not pursuing dishonest gain", takes a step further and pleads for total integrity in all our financial dealings. (Note that although this comment here is under the category of qualifications of deacons, in Titus 1.7 the same phrase is one of the qualifications for elders.) It is vital for us to learn this attitude of absolute integrity with regard to material things. Without such integrity, all we are teaching and saying will lack credibility.

#### *5. The Elder's Spiritual Maturity*

"He must not be a recent convert or he may be conceited and fall under the same judgement as the devil" (v 6). The Greek word *recent* suggests the meaning of *newly planted*. The force of this metaphor taken from nature is that a plant has to send its roots down deeply before it can produce fruit convincingly. If someone has only just come into the kingdom of God and only recently come to faith in Christ, that person ought to be allowed time to mature. Candidates for the eldership must first prove themselves and demonstrate to the fellowship the reality of grace in their lives before they are placed in positions of leadership. That is what Paul is saying.

#### *6. The Elder's Teaching Ability*

The final qualification for the eldership of a teaching ability needs careful consideration. It is stated at the end of v 2: "The overseer must be ... able to teach". Weymouth translates as "a gift for teaching". The reason this is so important is that one of the chief ways in which leaders will care for God's family is by feeding the flock of God. This is the significance of Peter's words when he says to the elders, "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care" (1 Pet. 5.2). What is the greatest task of the shepherd? The shepherd's task of course is to protect the sheep and to lead and guide them. But his most basic concern is to take them to good pastures - to feed them. Only as he ensures they have adequate pasture can they be nourished and mature and grow.

By the same token, our great task as under-shepherds of the flock of God is to take the flock to rich pastures. The clear implication is that the concern of the ministry will be about where the sheep are taken to be fed. This is why it is quite wrong to make a division between a pastoral ministry and a preaching ministry. We have all heard it said of some minister: "He is a great pastor but a dreadful preacher!" That is a distortion, it is ridiculous. The pastor is literally the shepherd because "pastor" means "shepherd".

Therefore, every elder, whether his ministry is public teaching or of a different sort, ought to be supremely burdened that the flock is being fed. This means that when I go into the homes of my people I ought to be concerned to know that the word of God, in whatever way it is being ministered to them, is being taken in, understood and applied to their lives. Someone is going to ask, "But how can this be true for someone who is not a teaching elder?" *Able to teach* is included here by Paul because he says there will always be people in the congregation who will say, "I couldn't understand what the minister was saying on Sunday". It is then the elder's task to say, "Can I help you? What was it that you couldn't grasp? Let's look together at the Bible passage the sermon was on. I will try and help you understand the points you couldn't

grasp". Able to teach. It may well be that the elder has an aptitude for explaining and teaching in that one to one situation which is greater than the aptitude of the one who is doing the public preaching. That is of enormous importance.

### **Prayer**

There is one other qualification for the eldership which isn't included in the passage from 1 Timothy on which this study has been largely based. We find it tucked away in a comment that James makes in his letter. I am referring to the verse about those who are sick: "Is anyone of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him ..." (Jas 5.14f). Most people who are interested in what James writes here are concerned about the question of divine healing. But it is easy to miss a much more fundamental truth which points to a qualification for elders hidden away here. "Is anyone among you sick? He should call for the elders ..." Why should the sick person call for the elders? Not because they are doctors. Not because they have some divine gift for healing. But because the person who is sick need to be prayed for.

Who are the praying people in the congregation? The elders! This is what will distinguish them - they will be praying people. That is perhaps the greatest qualification and it is certainly the most fundamental need within any fellowship of God's people. The minister who as teaching elder does not pray might as well not bother ministering. The elder, who is a ruling elder, who does not pray has disembowelled his ministry because this is the cardinal thing.

### **Conclusion**

The standard set in the New Testament for the eldership is high. But as I said in my previous article, I believe it would be impossible to exaggerate the importance of the eldership for the sake not only of the local church but also of the national church. The issues concerning a biblical view of the eldership are quite crucial. As I pray for the revival of the churches in Scotland and beyond, I find myself increasingly praying for the reformation of our view of eldership.