

Elders
Titus 1:5-9
ABC 11/15/20

Some passages are easier to preach than others. Our text this morning, Titus 1:5-9, is one of the harder ones. Why? Because it's so convicting. Paul gives Titus some qualifications for the men he was to appoint as **elders**. I think I can safely speak for all our elders in that none of us measures up perfectly & often feel unqualified. Before you think you're off the hook this morning & this is just for elders, you're wrong. Why is Titus to **appoint elders**? Because they're to be an example of these qualities because that's what God wants of us all. Every quality listed here is also God's will for every believer so don't sit back & relax, thinking this isn't for you. This is nothing but a description of godliness & virtue to which we're all called to & the vices listed we're all to be putting to death. It isn't only elders who are to be blameless, hospitable, self-controlled, & holy. It's every one of us!

With that being said, who runs this church? Many wrongly assume the pastor does. Others think church government is patterned after the US government & operates as a democracy. Another unbiblical model that's influenced how churches are run is that of business. But biblical church government is different. The church isn't just an organization but a living organism. We're a living unity, the body of which Jesus is head. God's plan is that Jesus runs His church through a plurality of godly men who shepherd His flock under His headship. All that to say, Paul gave Titus the job of organizing the church on Crete, including appoint **elders**. Paul trusted Titus to **set in order** the churches in Crete. **Set in order** means to *straighten* from the Greek word from which we get *orthodontist* & *orthopedics* which is straightening & aligning teeth & bones. Titus is to straighten up things in these churches. He's to do this by installing godly leadership in them. **5-9**

1. What is an elder? An **elder** is a spiritually mature man, knowledgeable in Scriptures, recognized by the local church to work with other elders in exercising oversight & shepherding God's flock. There are several terms used interchangeably in the NT to refer to church leaders.

A. Elders is the word in our text. **Elders** were a clearly defined, officially recognized group of men in a local church. There were always multiple **elders** per city. Elders are to be spiritually mature which is reflected in their godly character.

B. Overseer Elder & overseer are used interchangeably in the NT to refer to the same office (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7). **Overseer** comes from the Greek culture, where it referred to those appointed by the emperor to lead captured or newly founded city-states.¹ It looks at the function of the **elder** to superintend, watch over, guard, & set direction. In the NT, there's no difference between **elders** & **overseers**. The 2 words refer to the same group of men.

C. Pastor The noun **pastor**, which means *shepherd*, occurs only once in the NT with reference to church leaders & is linked with **teacher** (Eph 4:11). More frequently, it's used as a verb. Paul told the Ephesian elders, **Be on guard for yourselves & for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood** (Acts 20:28). Here the **elders** are called **overseers** & they're to do the work of *shepherding* the church. The same idea occur in 1 Pt 5:1-2, **Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder, ... shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God...** The elders are to shepherd the flock by exercising oversight.

D. Leader This term is used in Heb 13:17 where the church is commanded, **Obey your leaders & submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls...** Someday God will rule all the earth through His Son, the King of kings, but in the meanwhile He rules His church through godly men.

2. What elders do **Elders** should work together to exercise oversight & shepherd God's flock in a local church.

A. Shepherd The picture of the shepherd & his flock gives us many of the jobs of elders. A shepherd fed his flock by leading them to pasture. **Elders** are to feed God's Word to the church. While all elders must know the Scriptures well enough to be able to teach (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9), I don't believe this means all elders must have the gift of teaching publicly. Paul indicates that some elders devote themselves to the work of preaching & teaching & should be compensated so they

¹John MacArthur, *Answering the Key Questions About Elders*, p 9

can carry out that work (1 Tim 5:17-18). Shepherding also includes caring for the flock, tending to the wounds of the injured, nursing the sick back to health, & helping the young to grow in health & maturity. The elders are to pray for the sick (Js 5:14) & for all the church (Acts 6:4). They must exhort & encourage as a gentle mother or a tender father would to their children (1 Thes 2:7-12).

B. Oversight This refers to general managing of the church. The elders must keep their fingers on the pulse of the church, making sure it's spiritually healthy. This may involve guarding the flock from error, determining church policies, making decisions about the needs & direction of the church, supervising finances, coming alongside ministry leaders to give guidance, working to resolve conflicts, & many other such tasks. The elders don't do all the work that needs to be done, but they make sure it gets done by delegating it to qualified workers.

C. Work Together The leadership of any local church should be plural. Every time the term **elder** is used in the NT with regard to a local church, it's more than one (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 6, 22; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; Phil 1:1; Titus 1:5; Js 5:14; 1 Pt 5:1). While I don't agree with everything he said, Watchman Nee got it right when he wrote,

To place the responsibility in the hands of several brethren rather than in the hands of one individual, is God's way of safeguarding His Church against the evils that result from the domination of a strong personality. God has purposed that several brothers should unitedly bear responsibility in the church, so that even in controlling its affairs they have to depend one upon the other & submit one to the other.²

Working together in humility & mutual respect, the elders should seek to be of one mind in shepherding Christ's flock under His headship.

3. How are elders chosen? The idea of the church voting a man into leadership because he's popular or successful isn't God's way. In the NT, the apostles or their delegates appointed elders in the churches based on discerning which men met the biblical qualifications. These men were put in charge of the church. Rather than voting on who should be church leaders, it's better to say the church recognizes men who meet the qualifications for elders.

Jesus runs His church through a plurality of godly men who shepherd His flock under His headship. The church will only be strong & healthy when it has strong, godly leaders. Unfortunately, the

² *The Normal Christian Church Life*, p 44

common view is what a man does in private has nothing to do with his performance as a leader. In other words, character doesn't matter. That's not biblical. Paul left Titus on Crete to correct some of the problems in the churches there. The main way this was to happen was to appoint godly leaders who met some qualifications (1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9). The significant thing about these qualifications is, except for the ability to teach God's Word, it focuses on godly character, not on spiritual gifts or other abilities. Before we look briefly at this list, it's important we realize the majority of these qualities are to be found in every believer. We also need to keep in mind that no one meets these qualifications perfectly. These are lifetime goals & no one can say, *I've got them all down perfectly.*

4. Qualifications for Elders The qualifications for being an elder is spiritual maturity as reflected in his home life, personal character, & sound doctrine. **6**

A. Family The term **above reproach** is used in vss 6 & 7, 1st to sum up a man's home life & then to sum up his personal character. **Above reproach** means there's nothing in the man's life which an accusation could be brought against him.³ He's a man of integrity. This isn't speaking of sinless perfection but that there's no sinful defect in their lives that would call their righteousness or godliness into question. He displays the fruit of the Spirit at home, work, play, & church. It's from being **above reproach** that all these other character qualities come. This is the over-arching requirement & the rest of the phrases in this passage explain what this means in specific areas of life. Under this general requirement of being **above reproach**, Paul specifies 2 areas in which it manifests itself:

1) A One-Woman Man The fact that this qualification is named 1st after **above reproach**, both in Titus & in 1 Tim 3, shows its importance. There've been a number of interpretations of what this means. Some claim it's a prohibition against polygamy. But that would be like saying an elder can't be a cannibal. It's already known & assumed. Some interpret it to mean if a man's wife dies, remarriage would disqualify him as an elder. But that view doesn't come from the Bible. Others say a man who's ever been divorced can't be an elder. Most who hold this view limit it to divorce

³ R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the NT*, p 381

that happens after salvation, but some apply it even to divorce that occurred before salvation. But it appears Paul's focusing on a man's present spiritual maturity, not at sins he may have committed years ago. For example, what if a man used to be self-willed or quick-tempered or a drunk? Do these past sins prohibit him from ever becoming an elder? If so, then who would ever qualify? The term is literally, *a one-woman man*, & looks at character. He's to be devoted to his wife alone. He's not a womanizer. An elder should be a man who has a track record of being above reproach in moral purity. Note also, this doesn't eliminate a single man from being an elder, as long as he's morally pure (1 Cor 7:1-9). This has more to do with character than marital status. The emphasis is on faithfulness, monogamy, fidelity, & morality.

2) Children Who Believe This doesn't mean an elder must have children, but if he does, they're to be under his control. This also has created much debate. Does the Greek word here mean **believing** (NASB, ESV, NIV) or **faithful** (NKJV)? Does it refer to children who are under the father's roof or does it also apply to adult children? John MacArthur argues that if even one of a man's children, whether in the home or an adult, isn't a believer, the man shouldn't be an elder.⁴ Others say it only applies to children in the home & that the word means the children are faithful & under the father's control & not rebels.⁵ I think the correct view is somewhere in the middle. It's clear they aren't to be into **dissipation** or **rebellion**. Elder's children are to be faithful in obeying their parents not rebelling against them. The view that all of a man's offspring, whether children or adults, must be believers, goes too far in that it puts on the father the responsibility for his children's conversion, which is beyond anyone's control. Many godly men have had children who've rebelled against God (1 Sam 8:1-3), in spite of the father's example & his attempts to bring the child to saving faith. Some cite Prov 22:6, **Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it** & argue if a child goes astray, it means dad failed to bring him up properly. But that's to misinterpret that vs. Proverbs isn't a book of ironclad promises but a book of general truisms about life. Generally, if you train a child properly, he'll grow up to follow the Lord. But there are exceptions.

⁴ *Titus*, pp 30-31

⁵ Justin Taylor, *Unbelief in an Elder's Children*, www.9marks.org/article/unbelief-elders-children-exegesis/

As important as a father's example & training are, ultimately salvation is a supernatural act of God. While He uses godly parents in this process, no actions on the part of the most godly father can guarantee the salvation of his children. In my understanding, our text requires we should look carefully at a man's relationship with his children. Does he model godly behavior in the home? Does he train his children in the ways of the Lord? Obviously, each situation must be prayerfully considered. Whatever view you take, Paul's overall point is clear: an elder must be a godly husband & father. If his home life isn't in order, don't give him responsibilities over the family of God. A man who isn't devoted to his wife & whose children are unruly & rebellious shouldn't be put into church leadership. Paul then gives the personal characteristics a man must have to be an elder.

B. Personal (7-8) Paul repeats the summary qualification for an overseer in his private life of being **above reproach** & then adds (1:7), **as God's steward**. A **steward** was a household manager who was accountable to the owner for overseeing daily operations. The church is the household of God (1 Tim 3:15). Thus **elders** or **overseers** manage it under God's authority & must give an account to Him (a sobering thought!). Also, as a **steward**, this isn't *my* church or the *elders'* church. It belongs to God. He purchased it with the blood of His own Son. Elders are His **stewards**. Paul lists 5 negative character flaws that an elder must not have & 6 positive qualities he must have.

1) Not self-willed The word means an arrogant self-interest & refers to a man who stubbornly maintains his own opinion or asserts his own rights & doesn't care about the rights, feelings, & interests of others.⁶ The **self-willed** is overbearing & loves to assert himself & exert power over others. He never admits he was wrong & isn't a team player. Don't make him an elder!

2) Not quick-tempered A quick-tempered man is just a spark away from blowing up. He has a short fuse & uses anger to intimidate or control others. Js 1:19-20 commands, **let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak & slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God**. Patience, kindness, & self-control are fruits of the Spirit that should govern a spiritually mature man.

⁶ Trench, *Synonyms*, p 349

3) Not addicted to wine Crete was known for its wine & drunkenness. While the Bible doesn't prohibit alcohol it warns about drunkenness (Prov 20:1; 23:29-35; 31:4-5) which is sinful (Eph 5:18; Rom 13:13; 1 Pt 4:3; 1 Cor 6:12). No one wants a drunk for a leader, either in the church or outside of it.

4) Not pugnacious which means a brawler, violent, a fist-fighter but includes one who's verbally combative. An elder shouldn't be a man who solves conflict by fighting or by being an aggressive verbal bully. We should have no part in meanness, abusiveness, or retaliation, no matter how provoked.

5) Not fond of sordid gain In Tim 3:3 Paul states that he **must be free from the love of money**. Money itself isn't evil, but it is dangerous. It's like a loaded gun in that it can be useful if used properly, but can cause harm if used carelessly. A greedy man isn't qualified to be an elder, because greedy men aren't godly. They'll be tempted to take advantage of people financially or to misuse church funds. No Christian should be driven by money or financial gain. Heb 13:5 tells us, ***Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have.*** In vs 8 Paul gives 6 positive character qualities that an elder must have.

6) Be hospitable literally, *a lover of strangers*. Again, this is a quality that every Christian must cultivate (Rom 12:13; 1 Pt 4:9). Hospitality means giving practical help to anyone in need. It's taking a genuine interest in others & making them feel welcomed & at ease. It should begin here when the church gathers. If you're talking with someone you know & see a visitor all alone, don't keep talking to each other. Go to the visitor & make them feel welcome!

7) Love what is good As Paul puts it in Phil 4:8, **whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence & if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things**. This is having a strong affection for what is innately & biblically good. Is just loving what is good enough? No, Gal 6:10 tells us to also **do good to all people**.

8) Sensible means sober-minded or level-headed. It's translated **prudent** in 1 Tim 3:2. It means to be of sound mind, especially in the sense of not being impulsive. The **sensible** man isn't swayed to

extremes by his emotions. He doesn't give in to impulses that are sinful or harmful. He's level-headed. He lives in light of his priorities & commitments.

9) Just This word means *righteous* or *upright* & refers to a man who's fair, equitable, & impartial in his dealings with others. He isn't partial to the wealthy & doesn't ignore or belittle the poor. He's able to weigh the facts of a matter & make impartial decisions based on the evidence.

10) Devout refers to practical holiness; being separate from sin & evil behavior. It doesn't mean being separate from sinners, after all, Jesus was the friend of sinners. But the **devout** man doesn't carouse with sinners in their sin. Rather, he seeks to lead them to repentance. The **devout** man takes God & His Word seriously & lives in obedience to it.

11) Self-controlled Paul uses this word in 1 Cor 9:25 to refer to an athlete who exercises self-discipline in all things so he may win the race. An elder must have control over desires or habits that would interfere with knowing Christ more deeply or with being an effective shepherd of God's flock. He'll be disciplined about spending time with God in the Word & prayer. A self-controlled person lives an exemplary life on the outside because he submits to the Holy Spirit's control on the inside.

Every believer is called to each of these & **to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect** (Mt 5:48). It's imperative that a church put into leadership men who are spiritually mature, as seen in their home life & in their personal character. But that's not all. A moral man could have these qualities to some degree. Paul goes on to say an elder should be **9**.

Everyone has a theology. The question is whether it's a biblical or not. Everyone of us needs to grow in understanding the Bible so we can know God better & follow His ways more carefully. Part of the role of elders is to know Scripture well enough that they're able to keep the church in the truth in the face of Satan's attempts to introduce error. Therefore, Paul says, elders must be godly men who hold firmly to & boldly teach God's Word.

C. Doctrinal Soundness Paul gives 5 requirements for faithful elders with regard to God's Word in vs 9 & in a sense, this sums up the rest of the book. In the rest of the book, Paul is either exhorting Titus in sound doctrine or urging him to refute those who don't hold to it.

1) Have biblical understanding Every elder must be knowledgeable enough in Scripture so that he can teach a younger believer & correct doctrinal error when encountered. Even though preaching or teaching may not be an elder's spiritual gift, every elder must be studying & growing in his understanding of God's Word. To hold fast the **faithful** or **trustworthy word**, you must understand it. To understand it, you must study it. & studying it is a lifelong endeavor. If a man doesn't have a desire to study God's Word & grow in his understanding of sound doctrine, he shouldn't be an elder.

2) Have biblical convictions **Holding fast** means to cling to or be devoted to. John Calvin brings out the meaning by saying, *In an elder there is demanded not only learning, but such zeal for pure doctrine as never to depart from it.*⁷ Such strong convictions flow out of the 1st quality. The more you study the great doctrines of the faith, the more you appreciate God's grace shown to you in Christ. The more you study, the more you understand why these doctrines are essential. All Christians are to hold fast to God's Word, even in the face of persecution. John Bunyan spent 12 years in jail because he refused to quit preaching. He had a blind daughter & said going to prison & not being able to care for her was like pulling his flesh off with pincers. But he couldn't be silenced from proclaiming the truth of God's Word. John Piper's book, *Contending for Our All*, tells the stories of 3 men who held fast to God's truth: Athanasius, John Owen, & J Gresham Machen. Athanasius stood strongly against the Arian heresy, which denied the deity of Jesus Christ. At times, it seemed as if he alone was against the whole world. He was forced into exile 7x, but stood firmly for the truth. We need to temper this point about holding to biblical convictions with 2 cautions. 1st, we need to be firm & unwavering on the essentials of the faith, but we need wisdom & discernment about where & when to contend for the faith. There are some doctrines you must hold to & defend because if you deny them, you're not a Christian in the biblical sense of the word. This isn't an exhaustive list, but these truths include the trinitarian nature of God; the deity & humanity of Jesus Christ; His substitutionary atonement on the cross; His bodily resurrection; His ascension into heaven; His bodily 2nd coming to judge the earth; salvation by grace alone through faith alone

⁷ Calvin's Commentaries on Titus 1:9, p 295

in Christ alone; the inspiration, authority, & truth of Scripture; & the eternal reward of believers in heaven & the eternal punishment of unbelievers in hell. As I said, that's not exhaustive, because there are many other errors which, if you buy into them, lead to a denial of fundamental truths. For example, *open theism*⁸ denies the sovereignty & omniscience of God. That has implications for your view of God, how you understand & endure trials, & God's ability to fulfill His promises. 2nd, we need to contend for the truth in love. We mustn't love controversy or the feeling of winning a debate, but rather, we must love God & His truth above all & we must love people, including those who are in error. False teaching is cruel because it damages people. John Piper makes this helpful observation:

*For the sake of unity & peace, therefore, Paul labors to set the churches straight on numerous issues—including quite a few that do not in themselves involve heresy. He does not exclude controversy from his pastoral writing. & he does not limit his engagement in controversy to first-order doctrines, where heresy threatens. He is like a parent to his churches. Parents do not correct & discipline their children only for felonies. Good parents long for their children to grow up into all the kindness & courtesy of mature adulthood. & since the fabric of truth is seamless, Paul knows that letting minor strands go on unraveling can eventually rend the whole garment.*⁹

Elders must be men of biblical understanding & biblical conviction.

3) Have biblical obedience It would be hypocrisy to tell people to follow God's Word, yet not follow it yourself. Paul describes the false teachers in Crete as those who **profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable & disobedient & worthless for any good deed (1:16)**. Calvin said of pastors, *it would be better if they broke their necks while mounting the pulpit than to be unwilling to be the 1st to walk after God & to live peaceably with their neighbors, demonstrating that they are the sheep of our Lord Jesus Christ's flock.*¹⁰ Of course, no one lives in a state of sinless perfection. But, as we saw in vss 6-7, an elder must be **above reproach**. He can't be living a double life. He can't be a nice, loving man at church & an angry, abusive man at home. He's striving to be obedient to God's Word.

4) Give biblical exhortation They must be **able to exhort in sound doctrine**. **Able** means capable or competent. The word **sound** means healthy (our word *hygienic* comes from it). **Sound doctrine** aims

⁸ See sermon preached at ABC 4/22/01

⁹ *Contending for Our All*, p 168

¹⁰ *Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, p 126

at & results in spiritual health. Elders aim their teaching at building up people in the knowledge of God & in practical holy living. **Doctrine** means *teaching*, & includes both the doctrinal & more directly practical parts of Scripture. **Exhort** may mean either to urge to obedience & change or to encourage or comfort. Paul uses the same word in 2 Tim 4:2, where, after urging Timothy to preach the word, he adds, **reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience & instruction**. It implies our hearts must be in our teaching, so people sense the urgency of these truths. Thus elders must be men of biblical understanding, conviction, obedience, & exhortation. Finally,

5) Have the courage to confront error To **refute** means to speak against. Calvin says, *The pastor ought to have two voices: one, for gathering the sheep; & another, for warding off & driving away wolves & thieves. The Scripture supplies him with the means of doing both...*¹¹ Some think we should always be positive & never focus on the negatives. But to teach positively isn't enough. Paul says we must also **refute** false teaching. We mustn't be purposely offensive, but neither should we be so nice & polite that we end up watering down or compromising the truth. The apostles often named false teachers by name (1 Tim 1:20; 2 Tim 2:17; 4:14; 3 Jn 9). When Paul confronted the Galatian heresy, he didn't say, *The Judaizers are good brothers & we agree on so much. Can't we just set aside the areas where we disagree & come together on the basis of what we share in common?* No, he denounced them as preaching a false gospel & pronounced **anathema** on them (Gal 1:6-9). J Gresham Machen stood strongly for the truth when the church was being infested with liberalism. Machen said,

*Men tell us that our preaching should be positive & not negative, that we can preach the truth without attacking error. But if we follow that advice we shall have to close our Bible & desert its teachings. The NT is a polemic book almost from beginning to end.... Every really great Christian utterance, it may almost be said, is born in controversy. It is when men have felt compelled to take a stand against error that they have risen to the really great heights in the celebration of truth.*¹²

Elders must be godly men who hold firmly to & boldly teach God's Word of truth. You can easily find churches that will give you nice, uplifting, positive messages about how to succeed in life. But such messages will expose you to the winds of false doctrine. To be strong in the Lord, you must

¹¹ Ibid p 296

¹² *Contending for Our All*, p 146

be in a church that exhorts in sound doctrine & refutes those who contradict it. I am thankful for the elders we have and for their servants' attitudes in serving & leading us all at ABC. Pray for your elders that they be men of God's Word. But it's not just elders who are to have these qualities. You are too! All of us need to be pursuing godly character. All of us need to be pursuing being faithful in marriage, being a faithful parent, & pursuing & displaying the qualities listed here. Pick one of these areas where you struggle & bring it to God asking for His help in becoming more godly.