

A Good Elder, A Good Bishop  
Titus 1:5-9

As we saw last week, Titus had a big problem. In modern terms, he was the only teaching elder, the only pastor on the whole island of Crete, which contained several new church development projects. As Paul puts it in verse 5, Titus had to set things in order for these new congregations. And one of the main things he had to do was to identify those people whom God had gifted to be elders for each congregation.

And yes, I did mean to use the term elders in the plural. Verse 5 indicates that each congregation was to have more than one elder. And verse 7 makes it clear that the office of the elder and the office of bishop are the same office, because the words are interchangeable. There is simply no New Testament warrant for the idea of one bishop overseeing a whole raft of churches. There's just no way around it: if you want to do Church the New Testament way, you have to have a group of elders in session.

But here's the rub – if we Presbyterians are right that the office of elder and bishop are interchangeable, that means that elders collectively are supposed to do what bishops do. The word bishop means overseer, and that means that elders are called to be the spiritual overseers of their congregations.

Verse 7 gives us another insight into the elder's job description – he is called to be the steward of God. Usually we use the term “steward” in relation to money, but Acts chapter 6 explains that deacons are responsible for a congregation's fiscal concerns. That leaves elders somehow to be the stewards of the congregation's spiritual resources.

So, what does that mean elders should be doing from day to day? Verse 9 breaks it down for us. Elders should hold fast the faithful Word of God as they have been taught. Holding something fast involves not only believing it but valuing it and obeying it. An elder's first job is therefore to do what everyone in the congregation should do – to believe the Scriptures, to cherish the words of the Lord Jesus and His apostles and His prophets, and to do what these messengers of God have told us to do.

But elders are not just supposed to believe God's Word and to practice God's Word. They are supposed to teach God's Word. Verse 9 says that elders should be able to exhort other believers by sound doctrine, explaining what God's Word says, and applying God's word to the lives of individual Christians. In such a way, elders should constantly be encouraging other believers to be better followers of Christ.

But isn't that what pastors are supposed to do? Yes, but on a different scale. Teaching God's Word is indeed the primary job of the teaching elder, the pastor. But all the elders are responsible to help the members of the Church put that teaching into practice.

What should this look like? Here's an example. A few weeks ago, I preached a couple of sermons on giving, on how we Christians should consider everything we are and everything we have as belonging to God, and how we should devote all our resources to the advancement of God's kingdom. The main idea is clear enough, but you might be wondering how you could actually integrate more giving into your own life.

So, you might want to sit down with one of your elders and ask him about his own giving practices. You might even ask him to look at your budget and make some suggestions about your own spending habits. That's the sort of thing elders are supposed to do – to help individual church members put the teachings of the Scriptures into practice.

But there's another important thing that elders need to do. They need to take the sound doctrine they have learned and convince the gainsayers. This means elders need to correct those whose teaching is not in accordance with sound doctrine. Sometimes, that means elders need to rebuke those who speak against the teaching of the Scriptures.

You may remember a couple of weeks ago when we looked at Acts chapter 15. There, the whole church, the apostles and the elders, gathered to discuss a matter of disagreement and to settle a dispute. Elders are still called to participate in meetings of the session and the presbytery, correcting those whose teaching is not in accordance with God's Word. Moreover, elders are called to confront error whenever and wherever they find it, especially within the Church but also in the culture as a whole.

But this is not to say that ruling elders should behave like bulls in the proverbial china shop. For this reason, Paul gives Titus some advice on the sorts of people who make good elders. The overarching concern, which is repeated in verses 6 and 7, is for elders to be blameless. This means an elder should not bring scandal upon the congregation in the eyes of the outside world. For how could an elder with a bad reputation expect a non-believer to accept his correction or rebuke? An elder should also have a good reputation among the members of the congregation. For how could a disgraced elder expect the members of the congregation to follow his advice? A good reputation is essential for an elder to be able both to exhort the believers and to convince the gainsayers.

But what does such a good reputation look like? Paul first gives us some negative examples. Perhaps most importantly, an elder should not be self-willed. This means he shouldn't be stubborn or arrogant, someone who doesn't listen to what anyone else says, someone who doesn't think anyone else ever has a good idea. A good leader in the Church has to be a good listener, or no one will ever come to him for advice or counsel. Likewise, one who is able to convict non-believers of their errors must value those people enough to listen to them before explaining how they are wrong.

An elder should not soon become angry – this means he is not quick-tempered. After all, you wouldn't come to someone for spiritual advice about a personal sin problem if you thought he would blow up at you, right? In the same way, if a hot-tempered person were to confront you about something you believed that was wrong, wouldn't you just dismiss him as some blow-hard letting off steam?

Paul also says an elder should not be given to wine. It should go without saying that you wouldn't approach a known drunkard for spiritual advice. After all, you might not know if he was in his right mind when he was talking with you. Worse yet, if he did happen to be sober while he were counseling with you but he later became drunk, he might spill all your secrets. No, a drunken elder will not be an effective elder at all.

Paul goes on to say that an elder should not be a striker – not pugnacious, not a bully. There's no way a non-Christian would accept correction from someone who is always pushing people around. And we Christians want our elders to set a good example for us and to encourage us – we aren't looking for leaders who will try to coerce us into better behavior. An elder has to shoot straight and speak the truth, but always in a context of genuine love for others.

Paul says that an elder should not be given to filthy lucre. That means he should not be greedy for gain, not avaricious. After all, why should you listen to what a greedy man says about Jesus if his own heart is focused on other things? And wouldn't you also wonder if his advice to you were colored in some way by what he could get out of the deal?

But Paul doesn't just tell us what elders should not do. He also goes on to give us some positive individual characteristics of elders. An elder should be hospitable, but this doesn't just mean someone who puts on dinner parties. It points to a welcoming spirit – someone who is approachable, someone with whom you feel at home, someone who is interested in the well-being of those around him. Hospitality implies generosity in all areas of life. Wouldn't we all, Christians and non-Christians alike, be more likely to listen to a truly hospitable person?

An elder should also be a lover of good men. This can also mean he should be a lover of good things in general. You can tell a lot about someone by looking at his friends and his interests, can't you? Don't we want to be around people who value quality? Wouldn't we value their opinion more if we know that they don't give out praise easily, and if we know that their priorities are in the right place?

An elder should be sober. Now, this is not just the opposite of being drunken. This word describes someone who is sober-minded: prudent, thoughtful, self-controlled, sensible. I would hope that all of us, Christians and non-Christians alike, would tend to value the advice and listen to the teaching of people who think things through before speaking.

An elder should be just. A just person is righteous in the sight of God, living in according with God's law. Why would anyone, Christian or non-Christian, listen to the words of an obvious hypocrite? If he's not walking the walk, he shouldn't be talking the talk.

An elder should be holy. This describes someone who is pious or devout, someone who is pleasing to God, someone who draws close to the God Who is holy every day. Someone who spends a lot of time with God and in God's Word is someone equipped to give good spiritual advice to Christian and non-Christian alike.

Finally, an elder should be temperate. This word describes someone who is disciplined, who demonstrates self-control. Coming at the end of this list, this term would thus apply not only to an elder's emotions, but to his devotions. Is he disciplined in his seeking after God? Is he the sort of person who can model good spiritual disciplines for the rest of the church?

And Paul gives us a way of figuring out whether someone would be a good elder before we elect him – we should look at the way he leads his family. As he says in a similar letter to Timothy: "For if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?"

An elder should therefore be the husband of one wife – the Greek says he should be a one woman kind of man. Now, many different theologians have spilled much ink on these few words. Some say this phrase simply excludes polygamists from being elders, since having more than one wife was legal at the time. Some say it means that a man could only be married one time. Others take the broader view that it means an elder should be exclusively faithful to the wife that he has – that these words thus describe his behavior in his marriage.

But when we apply being a one woman man to the elder's job description, we can see that parts of all of these ideas come into play. Of course an elder should be one who upholds the

Biblical standard of marriage – one man and one woman for one lifetime – especially in the face of those who teach other things. At the same time, an elder should be someone who takes his own marital vows seriously – would you go to someone for advice on your own marriage if his isn't what it should be?

But Paul also says that an elder should have faithful children. The word faithful can refer to the children's saving faith, meaning that they should be believers. It could also refer to their general behavior, meaning that an elder's children should be faithfully following Christ in their daily lives.

It is this second idea that is expanded in the rest of the verse. Paul says that the children of an elder should not be accused of dissipation, which means they should be able to manage their money and time and friendships wisely. The children of an elder should also not be rebellious or insubordinate, either against their parents or against God's law.

So, what does Paul mean by faithful? Once again, he probably has parts of both meanings of the word in mind. For how can we expect children, or anyone else for that matter, to avoid dissipation and rebellion, how can we expect people to act like Christians unless they know the Lord Jesus Christ?

But why is an elder's family life any of the church's business? It's not only a measure of how well he does his job. It's also because many of the problems Christians have revolve around their families. If elders are those who are supposed to set a good example for us, and if elders are those who are supposed to help us apply Biblical truths to our everyday lives, surely we would want elders who have faithfully applied God's Word to their own family life, right? Likewise, if elders are supposed to confront the prevailing culture about marriage and family issues, no one will listen to them if they aren't managing their own families according to the Biblical model.

I suppose the bottom line is that if we expect our elders to be what the New Testament envisions them to be – bishops, spiritual overseers of our souls – we will naturally gravitate towards people who meet the description Paul lays out for us. On the other hand, if we simply expect our elders to act as the board of trustees of a small, local non-profit corporation, it won't matter very much what sort of people we elect to that office.

But if we want to do church the way the New Testament people did, if we admit our need for spiritual overseers because of our own tendencies to sin and self-deception seriously, we'll embrace the concept of elders as bishops and we'll seek out those who can best provide that kind

of oversight for us, holding us accountable to our profession of faith. For that is, as Paul says, the only way we can really set the Church in order.